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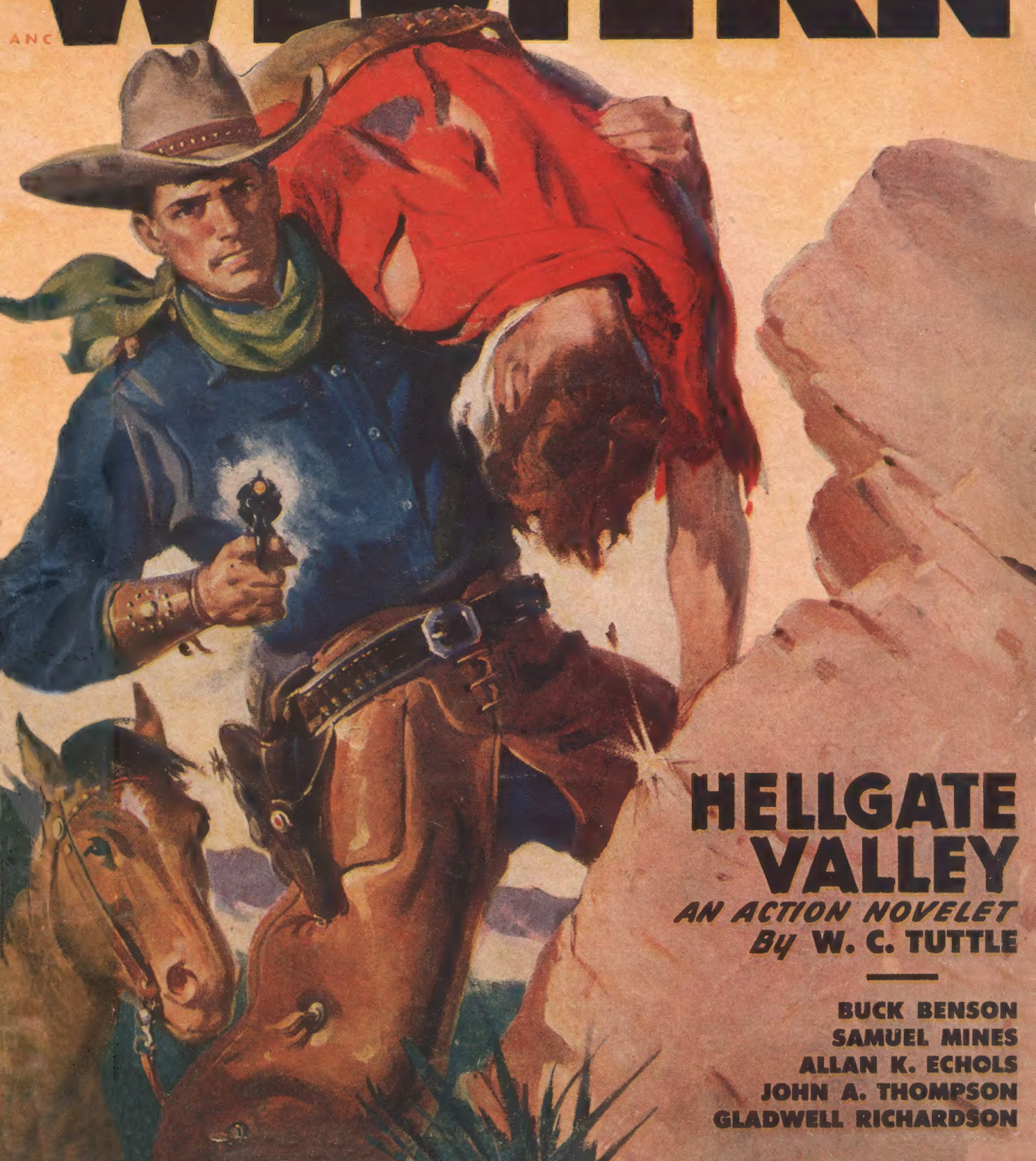

HELLGATE VALLEY

AN ACTION NOVELET

By **W. C. TUTTLE**

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Vol. LVIII, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION February, 1949

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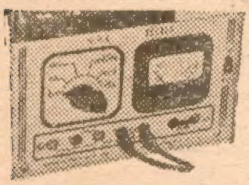

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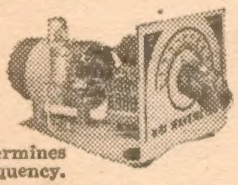

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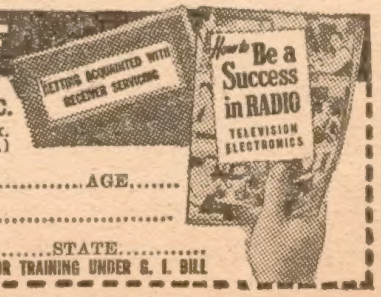

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The HITCHING Rail

HOLA, ever'body, and welcome once again to the good Hitchin' Rail! First inquiry on the stack this mornin' is from Pete Hammil o' Racine, Wisconsin. Pete and his wife Elouise want to know what we think o' the business o' capturin' wild horses as a trade.

Those two are sort o' figgerin' on goin' West some place where there's wild horses roamin' the range, capturin' these mustangs and sellin' them to the market. Horses, and a little home in the West sure appeals to Pete and his bride. He figgers the horses bein' wild and belongin' to nobody, all he'd have to do would be to catch 'em—after he'd learned how to throw a rope real good—and sell 'em for a fine price.

Well, sir, Pete, I know just exactly how you feel. You and Elouise both workin' at jobs in the city and dreamin' o' a free and adventurous life in the great West, lovin' horses and ridin' and earnin' a livin' while you have fun. Yessuh, I sure know how you feel.

You'll Sure Have Adventure

And I sure don't want to discourage you none whatever, but you'd better give the matter the once-over, from all angles, before you throw up yore job and trek for the great open spaces. Particularly to the job o' capturin' wild horses as a means o' earnin' yore beans and bacon. If you're merely lookin' for adventure, why, go to it, son—you'll sure have it, and plenty o' headaches right along with it.

It's a business, all right. Out in Montana at the town o' Billings last year a auction was held at which 700 head o' wild horses was sold.

That was a bucking-bronc auction—the meaner the animal the better the sellin' price!

Yessuh, that was sure a show. Quite a crowd gathered for the auction. Some of 'em were there to buy. They were the rodeo performers and Wild West Show people. But there was a whole lot o' folks, like me, there just to witness a good show.

The riders—those that didn't get hurt—had fun and some durned wild rides, the crowd had fun just watchin' and yellin' their fool heads off, and the auctioneers had the time o' their lives. They stood up there on their little platform, talkin' through their megaphones, crackin' jokes for the amusement o' the crowd, and boostin' the prices o' the mustangs accordin' to their ability to buck.

Yep, that was sure fun, but, brother, that was only the show put on for the auctionin' off of the broncs after the long hard work o' capturin' 'em had been finished. Now lots o' the horses were just unbroken range broncs, but some of 'em were from the wild herds you speak of, Pete.

Some o' those wildly buckin' broncs will settle down into plumb tame horses after the "breakin'" period is over. But others—and they're the kind that's valuable to rodeos and Wild West Shows—will be unmanageable as long as they live.

The Mustang Herds

Not so many years ago great herds o' wild horses roamed the West. It was these mustangs, when captured, that furnished the ranches with their first stock, mostly. They furnished the United States Cavalry with their "mounts" way back in the day when the Cavalry wore blue uniforms and were called "Dragoons."

Over a long period o' time, a much larger, stronger horse has been bred from these captured mustangs. Now the wild horse is looked upon as a nuisance, the herds grazin'

(Continued on page 8)

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*H. C. S., Calif.

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

on ranges the ranchers want for their domestic horses.

Ranchers often try to get rid o' wild herds, shootin' 'em down when unable to capture 'em alive. But it's not easy—the hardy little mustangs run so fast a cowboy has hard work to get within shootin' distance of 'em.

The wild mustangs are not large, only about two-thirds the size o' the blooded domestic animals. But through hardships o' climate, and the constant dread o' human bein's, they have developed great stamina. They're not much in demand on the market, not any more.

Hard to Catch

And they're sure mighty hard to catch, I'm tellin' you. A few years ago a group o' sixty picked cowboys attempted to corral a herd o' wild mustangs from that strip o' country lyin' between the Grand Canyon and the Utah border, their object bein' to free the range o' the wild herds.

Now these cowboys had constructed huge corrals in that wild country. They engaged airplanes to locate 'em, and to buzz 'em out o' their fastnesses. But, even so, the cowboys were unable to capture many—about one hundred o' the tamest o' the lot.

You see, the herds are led by vicious, fighting stallions that have developed an acute sense of hearin' and smell. Led by these stallions, the herds o' mustangs flee before the approachin' cowboys before they come within' rifle range. Now on this round-up I'm tellin' you about some o' the mustangs were put to flight by the air planes roarin' and swoopin' over their heads, but they had to be chased from fifteen to twenty miles before bein' caught.

Even then it was necessary for cowboys workin' in relays and ridin' good horses to lasso them and put 'em in corrals.

Some o' the wild horses died from actual exhaustion—they had literally run themselves to death—before they reached the corrals. Others died before they could be shipped to Flagstaff, the nearest railroad station, which was almost 200 miles away.

But, I'm tellin' you, that was sure a picturesque sight—that wild-horse round-up.

(Continued on page 90)

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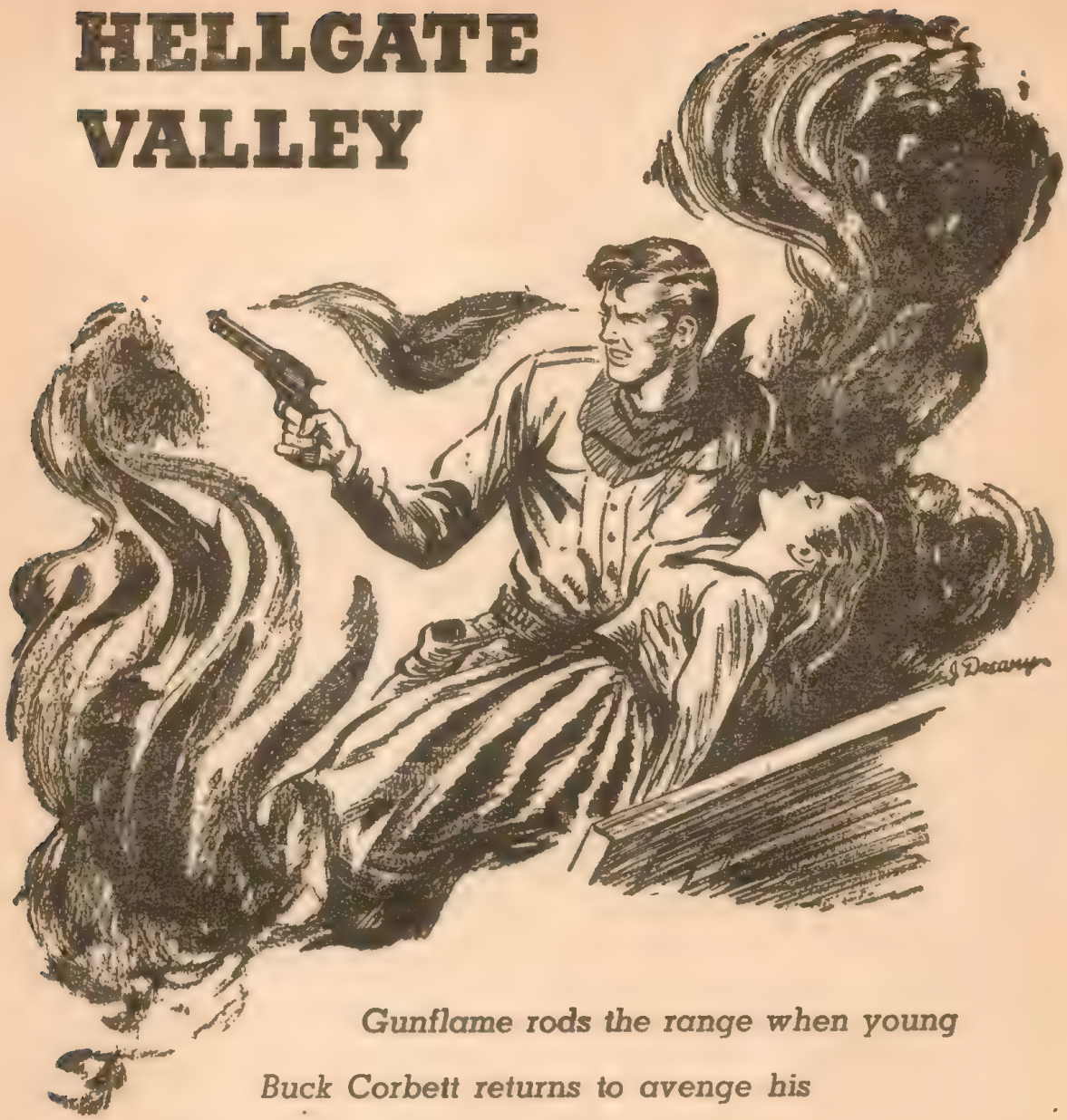
HELLGATE VALLEY



Gunflame rods the range when young Buck Corbett returns to avenge his dad—and to challenge a cattle king!

CHAPTER I

Corbett Returns

IT was night when Buck Corbett came back to Silver Point, riding a tall sorrel down the partly-lighted main street. He tied his horse at the hitch-rack near the big Tomahawk Saloon, and went up to the ornate front of the place. From inside came the roar of conversation, the clicking of poker chips; the banging of a tin-panny piano in the honkatonk.

Buck smiled grimly. Things hadn't changed. Buck had been away two years. He recognized several men, "Slim" Cassino, Sam McInnis, both foremen for the Parker outfits, men who hated Buck Corbett. The hate was mutual. Buck had

a novelet by W. C. TUTTLE

ridden quietly out of Hellgate Valley two years ago, and swore he'd never come back again, but circumstances had changed.

His father, Old John Corbett, owner of the JMC, had been shot to death, presumably by rustlers. Old Bill Sneed, known as "Huckleberry Bill," had written a postal card. It was badly written, and merely said:

BUCK, THEY GOT THE OLD MAN.

Buck knew what he meant. Everybody called John Corbett the Old Man. Huckleberry had been John Corbett's lone cowboy, and loyal to the nth degree. Buck was twenty-five now, an inch over six feet tall, with a bronze cast to his unruly hair, freckles on his nose, and a stubborn chin.

Buck was a fighter—fist or gun—and they knew it in Hellgate Valley. Huckleberry Bill, whose past was never quite clear, taught Buck how to draw a six-shooter—and when.

But now Buck Corbett was back—and Old John Corbett was three weeks cold in his grave. Buck walked into the Tomahawk and looked the place over. Someone spoke his name at the bar, and everything slowed down. Even the piano player ceased for the moment. Buck was looking at the five men at a nearby poker table, and one of them was looking back at him.

He was a huge, white-bearded man, whose size dwarfed the rest of the men around him. His white hair was dangling past his collar, and he lifted a hand to brush it away.

He was Peter Parker, known as "Peter the Great," who owned most of Hellgate Valley, owned the Tomahawk Saloon, and half the business places in Silver Point. Peter the Great was not only a big man physically, but also financially. His blue eyes, the color of ice, stared from under bushy brows at Buck Corbett.

SLIM CASSINO, slim, swarthy, handsome, was leaning against the bar, watching Buck. Cassino was ramrod for Parker's Cross L spread, a long-time suitor for the hand of June Parker, Peter the Great's daughter. June Parker was the reason for Buck leaving Hellgate Valley. She had, with tears in her eyes, but with firm lips, told Buck that she didn't love him any longer.

Parker's enmity toward Buck Corbett made it a little difficult for some of the men in the Tomahawk, who would have liked to shake hands with him.

A man walked into the saloon, going past Buck, stopping between Buck and the five men at the poker table. He was Old Huckleberry Bill Sneed, short, bow-legged and gnarled. He was just a little drunk, too, swaying on his old legs, his right hand splayed out over the butt of his old blackhandled Colt. He raised his voice:

"Pete Parker, you ole coyote, yuh murdered John Corbett! Now I want yuh to listen! I've done made a count of all the cows of the JMC. I'm makin' a count ever' few days from now on—and if one cow is missin', I'm goin' to shoot yore innards out, you rustler!"

Peter the Great heard it. In fact, everybody in the Tomahawk heard it. But Parker didn't make a sign. He just kept his eyes on Buck Corbett, his mouth shut. It annoyed Huckleberry. Slowly he went backwards until he was able to see who Parker was looking at.

Buck said quietly, "I'll meet yuh outside, Bill."

"Yea-a-ah!" whispered Huckleberry Bill. "That's fine, Buck."

He staggered a little as he left the saloon. Then Buck turned quickly and stepped outside, where he found Huckleberry Bill waiting for him.

The old rawhider said, "Sorry, Buck, I kinda blowed up."

They shook hands solemnly.

"We can talk better at the ranch, Bill," Buck said.

Slim Cassino walked to the doorway, and saw the two men ride away.

Peter the Great was cashing in his chips. He went back to his private office at the rear of the Tomahawk, and with him went Slim Cassino, Burke Travers, Nick Ellers and Sam McInnis.

Parker sat down at a desk, while the four men stood around.

Finally Sam McInnis said, "Boss, just

give us the word—and things like that won't happen again."

"Drop that!" snapped the big man. "Buck Corbett is back again, and that means—trouble. Buck and Old Bill will be backed by Rory McLeod. It's up to you boys to find the men who are stealin' my cows. If yuh can't, I'll hire men who can."

None of them had any comments. Cassino said, "Are you goin' to let that old rattler get away with that sort of talk?"

"He did, didn't he?" rasped Parker. "Nobody stopped him, did they? I want the rustlers of my cows—understand? That's all."

BUCK CORBETT

The four men filed out, each concerned with his own thoughts. Cassino, foreman of the Cross L, had been with Parker five years, Ellers, foreman of the Bar 70, four years, Sam McInnis, foreman of the 88, four years and Burke Travers, foreman of the Rocking R, three years.

Old John Corbett, who owned the JMC, and Rory McLeod, a hard-headed old Scot, owner of the Arrowhead brand, had refused to sell to Parker—at any price. Parker swore he'd make the valley too hot for them, but, in spite of the heat, they had stayed. That is, John Corbett stayed, until he was murdered.

There were only two exits from the valley where cattle could be driven. The north pass led to Manzanita, and the railroad. The south route, known as Hellgate Pass, led into Lost River. Parker's Cross L covered Hellgate Pass, making it impossible for any rustlers to take cattle out that way.

Buck Corbett and Huckleberry Bill rode the fifteen miles to the JMC, put the horses in the big, sway-backed stable and went into the old ranchhouse.

WHEN Buck and Huckleberry Bill got home to the JMC, the old man said: "I'm sorry I blowed up that-a-way, Buck, but I told him, didn't I?"

"You sure did, Bill," Buck agreed. "Everybody in the Tomahawk could hear it. There was a lot of itchin' guns in there."

Old Bill laughed soundlessly. "They didn't go for 'em."

"Tell me about the Old Man, Bill," Buck said quietly. "I got your postcard."

Huckleberry Bill cleared his throat. "All of this JMC is yours, now, but they been robbin' us, Buck—you know that. Pete Parker kept tryin' to buy us out but the Old Man wouldn't listen, and then we'd lose another bunch of cows. Well, one night the Old Man didn't come home. Next mornin' I found him down by the stable, propped up like he was settin' there, all shot to ribbons. But not a drop of blood on the ground. They'd shot him somewhere else and brung him home."

Huckleberry rubbed his gnarled hand across his misted old eyes and cleared his throat again. "Well, we give him the best funeral we could . . . June Parker was there . . . So was Peter the Great."

Buck stared in shocked surprise. "What! You mean to say Parker attended Pop's funeral?"

Huckleberry nodded. "That's right. Guess he jest came to gloat."

There was a long pause. Finally Huckleberry Bill said, "Yep, this JMC ranch belongs to you, now. Peter the Great'll offer

to buy it from yuh. Then yuh kin get out."

A grim flash sparkled in Buck Corbett's eyes. "I'm not gettin' out. I'm not selling it to Peter Parker or anybody else. We'll talk to Rory McLeod tomorrow, Bill."

There was another pause. Then Huckleberry said, "She's fine, Buck."

"Huh?" said Buck.

Huckleberry Bill grinned slowly. "June Parker. I thought yuh asked me."

"I didn't," Buck answered firmly.

"No, I don't reckon yuh did, Buck," Huckleberry said. . . .

Next morning Buck Corbett and Huckleberry Bill rode in at Arrowhead. Rory McLeod was out in the ranch yard, shading his eyes with his huge calloused hand as he watched them ride up. McLeod was a big hard-eyed, raw-boned Scot, with red hair that was flecked with gray. He welcomed Buck back to Hellgate Valley and shook hands gravely. Then he turned his somber blue gaze on old Huckleberry.

"Ike Devlin was at the Tomahawk last eve," he said quietly. "He heard ye berate Peter the Great. Some day it's your fool head ye'll get shot off."

"I told him," Bill declared warmly.

"Aye, that ye did," McLeod agreed. He slanted a glance at Buck. "They've hounded me, stolen my cows, but I'm a patient man. Some day—" Rory's big hands clenched themselves so tightly the freckled knuckles turned white.

Buck nodded. "Some day also, he'll pay for the shootin' of my father, Mr. McLeod."

"Aye, lad. Now come into the house."

Mrs. McLeod was a frail little woman but straight as an arrow. She kissed Buck warmly, for they were old friends. They sat down in the big main room of the ranchhouse and Buck told them he had no intention of selling the JMC. Rory McLeod welcomed the news.

"We've six guns now," he explained, "where we only had five before."

Mrs. McLeod looked her complete disapproval and then, to change the subject, mentioned that June Parker had paid them a visit only a few days before. When Buck made no comment, she went on.

"I only hope she doesn't marry that horrible Slim Cassino."

Buck absorbed that blow in silence. At last he said, "So she goes around with Slim, now?"

"Sometimes," Mrs. McLeod answered. "Cassino is Peter the Great's favorite foreman. June told me he calls Cassino the Keeper of Hellgate Pass."

Buck and Huckleberry Bill left soon afterward. Rory and Mrs. McLeod stood in the doorway and watched them ride away. . . .

The Parker home at Silver Point was the finest in all Tomahawk Valley. Peter Parker had spared no expense in building and furnishing the huge house. But with all his wealth, Peter Parker was not happy.

Now he stood in the center of the big living room and watched his daughter, June, descend the wide stairway. Slim Cassino had left a few minutes before, riding a tall black gelding. June was twenty-one, tall, dark-haired and lovely.

"Slim just left," Parker said.

June smiled. "I know," she said.

"He asked about you," Parker informed her.

June's head lifted, haughtily. "He shouldn't. Cassino is a man a girl gets very tired of seeing more than once a month. All he talks about is his only love, Slim Cassino."

Parker's scowl grew deeper. "That's no way to speak of him, June. He's a good man."

"He's a good spy for Peter Parker!" she retorted. "Especially since Buck Corbett came back!" She went on in quieter tones. "His voice is penetrating. Clear upstairs I heard him tell you that I went calling at the Arrowhead three days ago."

"It was his duty to tell me!" Parker thundered. "But that's got nothing to do with it. You're not playing square with me when you visit the McLeods. Rory McLeod is my worst enemy. Him and his gang are stealin' me blind. You keep away from that rustler roost!"

SHE FACED HIM defiantly. "I'll do no such thing, Dad. I promised you once I wouldn't see Buck Corbett any more and I'll keep that promise, but I've known Mrs. McLeod all my life. She's my oldest friend and I'll see her as often as I wish."

She turned and walked back upstairs, leaving her father sputtering.

Footsteps sounded upon the broad front verandah. There was a loud knock. Parker answered, and Dan Hogue, the sheriff,

Buck hauled in on the reins as he saw three men, hunkered down before him, talking quietly

and Smoky West, his deputy, walked in. Hogue was a tall, lanky man, while Smoky was small, thin, long nosed, and bowlegged.

"You wanted to see us, Mr. Parker?" the sheriff said.

"I did," Parker snapped. He was still ruffled after his tiff with June. "I've lost some more cows—sixty head from the Rocking R. Cattle thieves are ruining me. I'm going to stop it, regardless of the law."

"Meanin' what, Parker?" The sheriff's eyes had grown frosty, hostile.

"You know what I mean!" Parker snapped.

"Yeah. And I don't like the idea. You got no evidence against either McLeod or the JMC. Don't move without evidence, Parker. I'm the law around here."

"I put you in office, Hogue."

"Sure, I admit that. You can probably throw me out, too. But until that happens I'm still the law in Hellgate Valley. Don't make the mistake of forgettin' it." He shook a rope burned finger at Peter the Great. "You wipe out the Arrowhead or the JMC and I'll wipe you out!"

Peter the Great stroked his long white beard thoughtfully.

"You're a stubborn man, Hogue." He resumed in milder tones. "Dan, did you ever hear of a secret way out of this valley?"

"No. And I don't believe it. Who told yuh about it, Parker?"

"Just a theory," Peter the Great said. "My cattle leave the valley. When I moved into this place, years back, the Cheyennes were still in the hills. They used to raid the valley and they never left by the two regular passes. Rory McLeod was a good friend of the Cheyennes back in those days. They told him things they never would have told any other white man. Does that give you ideas? It might explain how my cows keep disappearin'."

The sheriff smiled. "Nothin' to it, Parker. Rory's losin' just as many cattle as you are. And he's blamin' you for it, too."

"He lies!" Parker roared.

Hogue rose to his feet. His grin had broadened. "And that's what he says about you."

The sheriff and his deputy left the ranchhouse and went back to their office. There Smoky West, for the first time since they had gone to Parker's office, opened his mouth.

"Huh!" he said.

"Yuh're a reg'lar chatterbox, Smoky!" the sheriff declared.

CHAPTER II

Street Fight

BUCK CORBETT and Huckleberry Bill were dismounting in front of the general store, the two officers came along. They shook hands with Buck.

"Are you goin' to keep runnin' the JMC?" asked the sheriff.

"I hope to, Dan," replied Buck. "It may be a tough job."

"Don't make it tough," said the sheriff meaningly.

On their way to the office Smoky said, "Huh!"

"There yuh go again," complained the sheriff. "Some day you'll open your mouth once too often. You do a lot of thinkin', and all to once you have to bust loose."

"Yeah, and when I do, I have something to say. Been thinkin' about that secret trail."

"Oh, yeah? Figurin' out that there might be?"

"Figurin' out there ain't none."

Buck Corbett didn't realize how badly the JMC had been cleaned out, until he and Huckleberry Bill rode the hills for three days, making a count. Rory McLeod and his three men, Ike Devlin, Steve Cort and Tony Ortega had been doing the same thing for the Arrowhead, and with like results. Both outfits were down to bedrock. In another few weeks, at this rate, and you'd have to use a fine-tooth comb to find an Arrowhead or a JMC animal on the Tomahawk range.

Buck Corbett, riding from the Arrowhead to Silver Point, met June Parker on the road. He hadn't seen her since he came back.

She said, "Buck, it is good to see you again."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, June. I wondered—"

"I was going out to see Mrs. McLeod," she explained quickly. "I'm sorry about your father, Buck."

"Thank you for goin' to the funeral. Bill told me."

"My father went, too, Buck."

Buck made no comment. She said, "Didn't Bill tell you that?"

"I believe he did mention it, June."

They looked at each other. Suddenly she said;

"Buck, I wish there could be peace in the valley."

"You're right. Things are worse than when I went away. Everybody hating everybody else. June, I don't like it."

She looked at him closely. "Buck, why don't you make peace with my father? He wants peace, even if he talks war all the time."

"He wants peace?" Buck laughed shortly. "Well, June, maybe he does. He's wiped out the Arrowhead and the JMC—and there's nothing left. No, June it isn't the time now. When the Parker outfit is cut down to our size, then will be the time to bury the hatchet."

"Buck, they outnumber you! You can't fight my father. Don't you see—you haven't a chance!"

"That is exactly how he looks at it, June."

June shook her head and picked up her reins.

"I guess it's hopeless," she sighed.

"Did you ask your father to make peace with us?"

"Well, I—I thought that something could be done."

Buck laughed. "June, you ought to know yore father better than suggest a thing like that."

"I do now," she said shortly. "I may see you again, Buck. Best of luck!"

He sat there and watched her disappear around a brushy turn in the road, then rode on into town and got the mail. As he stepped out on the sidewalk he came face-to-face with Slim Cassino. Both men stopped, only three feet apart. Several people stopped to watch developments. Cassino tried to smile, but failed. He was as big as Buck, reputed fast with a gun, and all that—but he didn't like the expression in Buck's eyes.

"Buck, there don't need to be trouble between me and you," he said quickly.

"There ain't—yet, Cassino," replied Buck evenly. "But what do yuh mean—between me and you?"

"Well, there's no use of us fightin'. I'm on one side of the fence, you're on the other, but, after all, I work for Parker, and I've got to back his play, no matter what my personal feelin's are in the matter."

"Meanin'," said Buck coldly, "that yore loyalty to Pete Parker is only measured by the salary he pays you every month."

"That's right, Buck."

"I've always figured you out as a coyote, Cassino. Why, you dirty traitor!"

"Wait a minute, Buck! I said—"

INTERESTED people on the main street were treated to a rather puzzling sight. Buck grasped Cassino by the shoulders, yanked him forward, and Cassino's gun, jerked from his holster, went spinning into the street. Buck tossed his own gun aside into the entrance to the postoffice, and slapped Cassino across the face with his left hand. It was all done in seconds, and the two men were facing each other again.

"You fool!" snarled Cassino. "I can lick you!"

A left hook, carrying plenty steam, to the ribs, sent Cassino against a porch-post, which saved him from going into the street. Men were running from every direction, converging on the two men, locked in a clinch. Cassino was no novice in rough-and-tumble fighting, but he didn't have his heart in the battle.

He tried to kick Buck on the shins, but Buck swayed aside, broke away from Cassino, and rocked his head back with a snapping right to the jaw. He managed to block another right with his elbow, but a left under the heart knocked his mouth wide open, as he gasped for breath.

His arms were down, shoulders sagging, an expression of misery on his face. Buck stepped in, slapped him in the face with his open palm, knocking Cassino flat on his face in the dusty street. Then Buck turned, picked up his gun and walked slowly to his horse. Cassino was sitting up, surrounded by men, when Buck turned the corner.

"Buck Corbett, you shore acted like a man who wanted peace," he told himself in disgust, as he rode out of town. "You

better keep yore back against the wall after this. Fine thing!"

The men on the street were not the only witnesses to this one-sided fight. Back a few feet from one of the front windows of the Tomahawk stood Peter the Great Parker, watching his pet manager get soundly whipped.

He said to a gambler, "Find out the truth of this, and let me know," and went back to his office.

Cassino was not badly hurt, but his prestige as a fighter was impaired. He claimed that Buck had made insulting remarks about Parker and his outfit, and that Buck's first punch, unexpected, of course, had stunned him. Peter the Great listened to the gambler's report, but made no comment, except to remark that he had always liked a winner.

Cassino didn't talk with Parker about the fight, but left for the Cross L as soon as he was recovered. It was the first physical encounter between the two factions in Silver Point.

Dan Hogue, the sheriff, didn't like what had occurred. He contended that next time guns might be used. He thought over the idea of asking every cowboy to give up his guns in town, but consulted Smoky West, explaining his idea in detail. Smoky listened. In fact, Smoky kept listening for five minutes after Hogue ceased explaining, and then said:

"No."

"I hope you've given the idea some thought," said the sheriff seriously.

Smoky nodded slowly; he was out of words.

Peter the Great was at home, pacing up and down the big room, when June came home from the Arrowhead. She changed from her riding clothes and came down to him. He looked curiously at her, as he sat down in a big chair.

"You've been out to McLeod's place again, eh?" he said.

"Yes. On the way out I met Buck Corbett—and talked with him."

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked.

"Because you probably know it."

"I guessed it," he said. "You went in that direction, and in a little while Buck Corbett came in from that same direction."

"And so?" she prompted.

"Slim Cassino met Buck Corbett in front of the post office. Corbett made some insulting remarks about me to Slim."

"Well, go ahead," said June. "What happened?"

"Slim Cassino got licked," Parker finished.

JUNE wanted to laugh, but held back. "Did anyone else hear the insulting remarks?" she asked. "Do defeated men always tell the truth?"

"I have faith in Slim. What did Buck Corbett talk about?"

"Well, he said that when the Arrowhead and the JMC had cut the Parker outfits down to their size, they'd talk peace."

"Oh, he did, did he?" roared Peter the Great. "When they've cut us down to their size, eh? Why, the poor fool—"

"Sit down, Dad," laughed June. "You're not as young as you once were. He didn't say he was going to do it today."

Peter the Great had a very choice vocabulary of profanity, which he proceeded to use, regardless of the fact that June put her hands over her ears. She was used to it. Finally, his anger back to the simmering point, he sank back in his chair and closed his eyes, his huge chest heaving.

June said, "Dad, do you know what I'd do?"

He opened his eyes and glared at her, but did not reply. She said, "If you can't whip 'em—hire 'em."

Slowly he sat up, staring at her. "Hire 'em?" he asked huskily.

"Fire Slim Cassino and hire Buck Corbett to run the Cross L."

"Why, you—you little fool!" he croaked. "Hire Buck!"

"Maybe he'd laugh at you, Dad—but it's worth trying."

"He'd laugh—"

"I would, if I were in his place. Wouldn't it be cheaper to hire all of them, than to fight them, Dad? At least, if you had Buck on your side—"

"June," he said in a husky whisper, "I've always known you are a rattle-headed little fool, but I—danged if I ever thought you were completely crazy. Go to your room!"

June went to her room, rather amazed at herself for suggesting such a thing, and Peter the Great went back to his pacing of the big room. Fire Slim Cassino! Fire

the best man he had—and hire Buck Corbett! If you can't whip 'em—hire 'em! He stopped at a big window and stared out across the hills. Hire Buck Corbett! At least, he'd be on my side. Ridiculous idea. What if he wouldn't take the job. Of course, he wouldn't. Too smart.

But if he had Buck Corbett where he could watch him, spy on him . . . There might be a secret trail out of Hellgate Valley. There might be a trail, and Buck would know it. Somehow, they might find out!

Peter the Great smiled slyly in his huge beard. The idea wasn't so bad after all. The only stumbling block was—would Buck Corbett take the bait? It would have to look right. Peter Parker, firing his best man to make Buck Corbett responsible for the Cross L and Hellgate Pass!

Parker walked down to the stable, where several of his men were taking a siesta. He selected one and called him aside.

"Get in touch with all the ramrods," he ordered. "Tell them I'm holdin' a meetin' here tomorrow night. It's important."

The man nodded and started away, but Parker called him back.

"Tell Slim Cassino to come to the Tomahawk tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll do that, boss," nodded the man. "I better send a couple other men with the message, so they'll all git it today."

"All right—send 'em."

CHAPTER III

Parker Fires His Foreman

LONG before daylight the next morning, Buck Corbett was out riding. He told Huckleberry Bill that he was just taking an early ride. Bill wondered, but didn't ask questions. If Buck wanted to get up before daylight and go riding, it was all right with Bill.

Daylight found Buck down in the vicinity of the Cross L, off the road, cutting through the hills. Buck knew the country very well. He wanted to take a look at Hellgate Pass, and he had to swing a long ways wide of the Cross L ranchhouses.

There was no road through the pass, only a little-used trail, opening up into the Lost River country, a wide expanse of desert, with no ranch nearer than fifty miles. Buck knew the owner of that ranch, one Zell Lorimer. Buck had heard that Lorimer was sort of a boss in the Lost River country.

The Cross L ranchhouses were not over a mile from the high cliffs of Hellgate Pass. Buck rode along the brushy hills above the ranchhouses. There was the usual activity around the place, and Buck was careful not to expose himself. He swung in close to the cliffs and began working his way down to the level of the pass.

He was almost down, angling past a flaring slab of rock, when he jerked up on his reins. He was looking down on the empty saddles of three horses, and just beyond them, screened by the brush, were three men, squatted down, talking quietly. Buck had almost ridden into them. Slowly he slid out of his saddle, careful where he placed his feet. Quietly he moved his horse to the right, in under the slab of rock and out of sight of the three men. When he moved back to where he could see the horses, all three men had mounted. After a few moments they separated, one riding back toward the Cross L, and the other two going to the right, out of Buck's view. He squatted on his heels and watched the rider, heading for the Cross L. He was Slim Cassino.

Buck was in no hurry now. He sat there and smoked a cigarette. Looking down on the other two men, he had no chance to recognize them. There was no question in his mind that they went through Hellgate Pass—it was the only place they could go, traveling in that direction.

A little later he moved down to the pass and examined the trail. There were tracks of two horses, coming and going, but no other signs that anyone had been over the trail. Except that he had a meeting with those two men, why would Slim Cassino be there with them at an early hour? He had also noted that these two men had rifles on their saddles.

Buck turned back into the hills, circled the Cross L at a greater distance, and finally came back to the road to Silver Point, only to run squarely into two men

from the Cross L, Tom Ferris and Lou Miles. Buck came down through some heavy brush and poked into the road only a few yards ahead of the two riders from the Cross L. In a way, it was embarrassing.

Ferris jerked up his horse, swung his right hand back toward his gun, but hesitated and said, "Hyah, Corbett."

"Howdy, Ferris," said Buck coldly.

"Hyah, Miles."

"Purty good," replied Miles slowly, watching Buck.

As if by mutual consent they rode on together, but conversation was exactly nil. Less than a quarter of a mile beyond the meeting place, Ferris said, "We're turnin' off here."

Buck drew up with them and said, "That's fine. When yuh get back to the ranch, pretty quick, you tell Slim Cassino that I was out, takin' a look at Hellgate Pass."

Both men looked narrowly at Buck. They didn't deny that they would be back at the ranch "pretty quick."

Ferris said, "Yeah, we'll tell him, Corbett. Glad to have saw yuh."

When the three men had swung back over a rocky trail, Buck rode on. Nearer Silver Point, where the road from the 88 intersects with the main highway through the valley, Buck encountered another of Parker's ramrods, Sam McInnis, of the 88.

SAM, a tall, easy-going person, smiled and nodded to Buck.

"Hyah, cowboy," he said. "Heard yuh was back."

"You probably did," Buck said with a smile.

"Yessir, I heard yuh was back, Buck. I ran into Slim Cassino yes'day afternoon, and he told me yuh was back. Before that I talked with Pete Parker, and he said yuh was back. How are yuh, Kid?"

"I'm all right, Sam."

"I hope to tell yuh—you are. Got m'self a laugh out of it."

"I didn't know that Peter the Great allowed his men to laugh."

"Ord'narily—no, Buck. Fact is, there ain't much to laugh at. If somethin' tickles me awful much, I sneak out behind the stable and indulge m'self. How's Ol' Huckleberry Bill? I ain't seen him for a long time."

"He's fine, Sam."

"He shore is. Do yuh know, Buck—when Gabriel blows his horn, and we're all throwed into one big herd—Ol' Bill won't be there—he'll still be here—and fine as frawg-hair."

They both laughed. Buck knew that Sam McInnis was one of Parker's fastest gunmen, loyal to the core, but no fool. After a short ride McInnis said:

"Ol' Bill shore waved his war-medicine at Parker the other night at the Tomahawk."

"He had a few drinks, Sam."

"It hurt Parker."

Buck looked curiously at McInnis. "Hurt *Parker?*" he asked.

"As strange as it may seem it did, Buck. He accused Parker of murder—murderin' yore dad."

"If Parker's gang didn't do it, who did, Sam?"

Sam McInnis shook his head. "I dunno, Buck. I don't think that Parker ordered it."

"Sam, you just mean that Parker didn't order you to do it."

"Yeah, I mean that, too."

"Yo're just guessin' on the rest of the gang."

"That's right. Buck, I boss the Eighty-Eight—that's all. Parker gives me orders, but he never gave me that one. How come you and Slim Cassino locked horns?"

"Did Slim give a reason?" countered Buck quickly.

"Well, he said that you spoke insultin'ly of the Parker outfit, and especially Parker. He said he resented it."

Buck laughed shortly. "He resented it, eh? I suppose he tore right into me, eh? Sam, I took his gun and threw it into the street, and tossed my gun aside, before Sam even made a move. He didn't want to fight. I had to slap his face."

"Maybe," said Sam quietly," that's what he resented."

"Yeah, that could be. Sam, the JMC is broke, Rory McLeod is just about broke. Do you think that we can feel kindly toward Peter Parker and his gang? Parker wants us broke, so he can take over and own the whole valley. Well, we're just about broke, but we ain't whipped, Sam."

"I'm sorry, Buck. I like Ol' Bill and I—blast his heart, I like Rory McLeod. If

Parker heard me say that, he'd fire me. I'm just a hired man on horseback. I take my orders and try to follow 'em out."

"Thanks, Sam."

"Don't thank me. I've never shot a man in the back, nor stole a cow. It's ag'in my nature, Buck. Parker claims that the JMC and the Arrowhead are stealin' his cows, herdin' 'em along with their own—over a secret trail and out of the valley. I'm not sayin' anythin', Buck."

Buck smiled thoughtfully. "That's a good idea, Sam," he said. "If I can find out where that trail goes out, I might use it."

They parted at the outskirts of Silver Point, and Buck went back to the JMC. Huckleberry Bill was on the front porch, puffing away at his old pipe. Buck stabled his horse and walked back to the porch. Bill didn't ask him where he had been. He said;

"Well, yo're doin' pretty good, Buck."

"What do yuh mean, Bill?"

"Well, you ain't been back here long enough to skin a cat, and Pete Parker is writin' yuh letters."

"Writin' me letters? Bill, what do yuh mean?"

OLD BILL reached into his pocket and took out a crumpled envelope. It had Buck's name on it, sprawled in ink. Buck took it and looked at it closely.

Bill said, "A while ago, who comes a-ridin' out here but Ab Monte, one of Pete Parker's pet cutthroats, and gives me this here letter. He says Pete Parker sent him. That's all. He jist turns around and rode back, kind of flinchin' like he kinda expected me to center a bullet in his back, the insultin' pup."

Buck opened the letter, and written in Parker's sprawling hand, badly blotted in spots, was the following;

Buck Corbett:
If you ain't afraid to come I'd like to see you at my place about nine tonight.
Peter Parker

Buck read it aloud to Huckleberry Bill, who almost bit the stem off his pipe. He roared, "Why, that murderin' old coyote! Buck it's a trap. You'll never get out alive. The idea!"

"But, Bill, if he wanted to trap and kill me, why send me a letter, askin' me to come? That's evidence, if anythin' happened."

"Evidence! You couldn't convict Pete Parker in Hellgate Valley. Why, he owns the courts, too!"

Buck sat there and studied the letter. It didn't make sense.

"If I ain't afraid to come to his house! Bill, he's darin' me—and I'm goin'."

"You ain't that big a fool, Buck!"

"I don't know just how to measure a fool, Bill, but I'll be there."

"You don't even know that's Pete's writin', Buck. Maybe it's Slim Cassino's writin'. When you walk into the place—blooey! You'll be dead, and Parker will claim you came to shoot him, but lost out. No, sir, I wouldn't Buck. Honest, I wouldn't do it."

"Of course, you wouldn't, Bill. He didn't invite yuh. . . ."

Slim Cassino came in from the ranch, in answer to Parker's request, and went to Parker's office in the rear of the Tomahawk Saloon, where they were closeted for a half-hour. What was said, only Parker and Cassino knew. It must have been important, because, when Cassino came from the office he had the snarling expression of a suspicious coyote. He yanked his tie-rope loose from the hitch-rack, vaulted into his saddle and spurred out of town.

At a few minutes of nine that night, Peter Parker and his four foremen, Slim Cassino, Nick Ellers, Sam McInnis and Burke Travers sat around the big table in the main room of the Parker home. The only light was a huge, coal-oil chandelier over the big table. The men were tight-lipped, silent, watching the big boss. Cassino twisted nervously in his chair, but the rest were quiet, waiting to hear what this was all about.

Once Parker looked at his huge silver watch, which he wore with at least five ounces of gold nuggets linked into the chain. Finally he broke the silence.

"We've been together a long time, men. I've had perfect faith in all of you men, but—" He paused and looked closely at each face around the table. "But," he continued, "when I lose faith in a man, I'm through with him. He shifted and looked directly at Slim Cassino, as he said, "Cassino, yo're through as foreman of the Cross L."

The statement was a shock to the other three men. Cassino had been Parker's pet. Cassino started to say something, but Parker said sharply, "Wait! Don't say anythin' you'd be sorry for, Slim. After all, it's my privilege to hire and fire men. You'll be paid up to the first of the month."

Cassino looked bleakly at Peter Parker, lips tight, eyes narrowed. He got slowly to his feet, leaning against the table, as he said huskily, "I'll go and get my personal things, Parker."

"Go ahead," said the big man.

Cassino turned from the table, walked to the big door, flung it open and went out, not even looking back. It seemed that every man, except Parker, drew a deep breath. Parker said quietly:

"We are not discussin' my reason for that move, men."

THEY heard Cassino gallop away. A sound on the porch caused them to look toward the big door, but another sound brought them back, looking the other way. Just inside the big, open window stood Buck Corbett, his thumbs hooked over the top of his gunbelt, his eyes watching every movement of the four men. He had stepped aside, out of line with the open window.

After a few moments of scrutiny Buck said quietly;

"Parker, I got yore letter—and I'm here."

The three men looked at Parker, surprised that he should send for Buck Corbett, but the big man had a smile on his face. He said, "Come and sit down, Corbett."

"I talk better standin' up, if yuh don't mind."

"I don't mind, Corbett. You are not in any danger in my home. A few minutes ago I fired Slim Cassino."

"Yeah, I was outside the window and heard it. Why did yuh fire him, Parker?"

"Maybe I like a winner, Corbett. I saw you whip Cassino."

"Small reason for firin' a good man, Parker."

"Oh, you think he's a good man, eh?"

"A good man for you, Parker. I don't believe he's got as much conscience as a rattlesnake."

That remark was like a slap in Parker's face, but he brushed it aside. He said, "I guess it was time to get rid of his kind."

"Why did you send for me?" asked Buck.

"I'll tell yuh why!" snapped Parker. "I don't like yuh, Buck. You've always been too free with yore tongue and fists. But I do know that you're honest and yuh do know cattle. I'm offerin' yuh a job as ramrod of the Cross L."

That statement was rather a jolt to the other men, except Sam McInnis. He breathed, "Good!" and Parker turned quickly.

"Did you say somethin', Sam?" he asked. Sam shook his head.

Buck came forward a few steps, staring at Parker. The offer was hard to believe. He said;

"What's gone wrong with you, Parker? Losin' yore mind?"

"Yore salary will be a hundred a month, and found."

Buck thought swiftly. There was some motive behind this, but it was something that would have to be figured out later. He had heard Parker fire Cassino, and his method had been rather brutal—firing him in front of the other men. But that was like Parker, to do things that way.

CHAPTER IV

Cassino Takes A Hostage

ALL of the men were watching Buck curiously, but Buck's gaze was centered on the patriarchal face of Peter the Great, as he said;

"If anybody made a bet that I wouldn't take that job—they lose. Parker, I'll move out there tomorrow. Tonight, at least, I sleep safely."

Buck had backed to the window. Now he swung a long leg outside, ducked his head, and was gone. Again the men drew a deep breath, as they all looked at Parker, who seemed wrapped in thought. He suddenly realized that the men were waiting.

"We will not discuss my reasons for hiring him, men," he said. "This meeting is adjourned."

The three men filed out and Peter Parker locked the big door. As he turned

from the door he saw June, a dim figure in the half-light at the top of the big stairway. He walked to the table, looked up at her and said, "Well?"

"I heard it all," she said throatily. "It was like watching a scene in a theater. It didn't ring true."

"Why did you listen?" he asked angrily.

She came part way down the stairs, ignoring his question.

"Why did you do this?" she asked.

Parker laughed shortly. "My dear, I'm doin' exactly what you suggested. If you can't whip 'em, hire 'em."

"Dad," she said slowly, "somewhere behind all this is a dirty motive. I don't know where it is nor what it is, but it's there."

"I'm not fightin' him, June. He's as suspicious as you are. If I'm not mistaken, Buck Corbett can take care of himself."

"You told him you knew he is honest, Dad. You better be honest, too."

"This is a fine state of affairs!" he roared. "Daughter tellin' her father to be honest. Go to bed! Nell's bells! Haven't I got enough to contend with, without a carpin' female accusin' me of bein' dishonest. Go to bed."

"You ran him out of the valley once, Dad," she reminded him.

"I did not!" He struck the table with a balled fist. "How many times have I denied that. As far as that's concerned, you ran him out. Go to bed! I'm tired of talkin'."

He picked up his hat and walked out, going up to the Tomahawk. June didn't go to bed. After what had happened, she didn't feel like trying to sleep. There was a huge patio at the rear of the house, with high, adobe walls, roses and a small fishpond, all of it covered by two enormous sycamores.

June sat down on a bench against one of the trees. Mocking-birds called from the branches, where the moonlight filtered down to lace-like patches on the old tiles. Suddenly two men came into the patio, walking to a point very close to her.

One of them said: "I came back as quick as I could. Ain't we foolish to meet here?"

"No. Parker went up to the Tomahawk, and the girl's gone to her room. I heard him order her to go to bed. We've got to work fast. That crazy Corbett will go out there tomorrow and we've got to handle this fast. Maybe it's our last chance, and we want to make it a good one. We can't let Corbett ever git out there, and even if he does, he'll—"

"Hold it!" snapped the other man. "What the devil?"

Then he walked almost into June, grabbed her with both hands.

"So you was listenin', eh?" he snarled. "Don't scream. You open yore mouth and I'll cut yore throat!"

The other man cursed bitterly, as the first man held June and kept a hand over her mouth. Both men were panting.

She heard one of them say, "No, you fool! We'll take care of her, until we pull out. Listen, you little fool!" He shook June roughly. "Behave yourself and you'll be safe enough, but if yuh try to yell or git away—"

"I won't," whispered June. "Don't hurt me."

"That's better; come on, you!"

BACK at the JMC, Old Bill was waiting up for Buck, and came out on the porch, as Buck came up from the stable.

"I don't mind tellin' yuh," he said flatly, "that I didn't expect yuh to come back, Buck."

Buck laughed and they went into the house, where Buck sat down and rolled a cigarette, while Bill waited anxiously for Buck to tell him what happened. But Buck was in no hurry. He lighted the cigarette and grinned at his old partner.

"Bill," he said, "you are now lookin' at the new ramrod of the Cross L."

"The what?" gasped Bill. "Ramrod for the— Buck, have you been a-drinkin'?"

"Do I look drunk, Bill?"

"You don't look it, but yuh shore talk it. What happened?"

Buck told him in detail of his meeting with Peter the Great, the offer of the job at the Cross L, and his acceptance. The old man listened, his jaw sagging a little. When Buck finished, he said:

"Now it's time for a man with brains to step in, Buck. This is a trap and you've done walked into it. They jist didn't dare blow yuh full of holes at the house. Parker's too smart for a thing like that. But you jist git out to that Cross L—you'll see what happens."

"I'm no fool, Bill," said Buck soberly. "There's a trick behind this deal, and I'm goin' to take a chance and find out what it is. We can't fight Parker in the open. Maybe I can put the deadwood on him in some way, by playin' the game with him."

"How?" asked Bill flatly.

"Who knows? They say that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, Bill. Maybe I can find the weak link. Parker has a pretty strong chain strung around Hellgate Valley, but there must be a rusty spot somewhere."

Huckleberry Bill shook his head helplessly. "Parker's no fool," he argued. "You ain't got a Chinaman's chance. Let's go to bed. Maybe in the mornin' you'll wake up and show some common sense, which you shore ain't got none of tonight."

Next morning Peter Parker was pretty well satisfied with himself, as he ate a big breakfast. Mrs. Morales, the Mexican woman housekeeper, was a good cook. She had been with Parker for many years. He did not ask about June, because she rarely had breakfast with her father, who had never gotten over the idea that a man should get up at daybreak. He was usually at the Tomahawk ahead of the swampers. . . .

Out at the JMC, Huckleberry Bill was still arguing with Buck, as they ate breakfast. He absolutely didn't want Buck to go out to the Cross L. If Buck did, he was going along.

"Don't be silly," grinned Buck. "You wasn't hired."

"I can work *segundo* for yuh, Buck. You need help. They'll gang up on yuh. Cassino has at least seven men out there, and they'd hate you for takin' his job."

"Somebody's got to work this spread, Bill—and don't be so foolish. I'll handle this alone."

But Buck didn't leave early. In fact, he waited until the middle of the afternoon. All he wanted to do was to get there just ahead of darkness. He argued that it would look as though he was anxious for the job, if he went out early.

As soon as Buck left the ranch, Bill saddled his horse and headed for the Arrowhead ranch. He wanted to tell Rory McLeod of what Buck was going to do. There was no question in Bill's mind that Parker was going to give Buck a bad deal, and he wanted to talk it over with somebody besides Buck, who, according to Bill, wasn't showin' the sense that God gave geese in Ireland.

He found Rory unsaddling a tired horse at the corral. Rory said:

"Where's Buck?"

"Let's go set on the porch, Rory. The news I've got is nothin' for a man to take standin' up."

"The boy ain't been killed—hurt, has he, Bill?" asked the old man anxiously. Bill shook his head.

"He was alive the last I seen of him, Rory."

THEY went up and sat down on the porch. Mrs. McLeod came out and shook hands with Bill, who said, "You may as well stay and hear what I've got to say. Otherwise Rory would tell you and prob'ly get it all wrong."

"My goodness, Bill!" she exclaimed. "What on earth happened?"

So Huckleberry Bill sat there and told them the story, beginning with the letter, and ending up with his arguments with Buck Corbett.

Rory said wearily, "And so he went, eh?"

"The devil couldn't have stopped him, Rory."

"Aye, I know that. Stubborn lad. Thinkin' he might help all of us. And why would he fire Cassino. That snake's been with him for years. I believe he was to marry June."

"June wouldn't look at him," declared Mrs. McLeod warmly. "I know the heart of that girl. Believe it or not, she still loves Buck Corbett, and don't ye believe otherwise."

"She turned him down," said Bill. "That's why he left."

"Aye," sighed Rory. "She did that."

"What's to be done?" queried Bill. "What can be done?"

Mrs. McLeod shaded her eyes, looking down across the open country south of the ranch.

"That must be Tony Ortega," she said. "It looks like his horse."

"He's comin' back early," remarked Rory, after a glance at the approaching horseman. "Yuh see, Bill, I sent the three boys in three different directions this mornin' early. I can't believe I've lost that many head. I sent Tony far south, tellin'

him to scout the hills around the Cross L."

"What's wrong with Tony?" asked Mrs. McLeod, getting to her feet. "The boy doesn't drink, but look at him!"

Both men got up quickly. Either Tony Ortega was drunk, or—

"The man's hurt!" grunted Bill. "C'mon, Rory!"

They went running down across the yard, but before they could reach the horse, Tony Ortega slid down over the horse's left shoulder and went flat on the ground.

The young cowboy had been shot twice, and, judging from the dried blood on himself and saddle, he had ridden a long ways after being shot. The two men picked him up and carried him to the house, placing him on a bed. He was out, cold.

Mrs. McLeod got water and towels, sponging the blood off him, while Rory swore a horrible vengeance on the man who did it. Tony regained a sort of consciousness for a moment or two.

"Rustlers—Cross L—" he said, and passed out again.

"Cross L, is it?" muttered Rory. "Parker, you devil! This is the last straw. Who's that?"

It was Ike Devlin and Steve Cort, Rory's other two riders. Bill told them what happened to Tony, while Rory talked to Mrs. McLeod. He came from the bedroom and said:

"We're ridin', men. Ike, you and Steve saddle fresh horses. Tie on rifles. We'll send Doc Kenton from Silver Point. *Vamoso pronto.* Are you ridin' with us, Bill?"

"Try to stop me," replied the old man. "If you've got an extra rifle, Rory—and a handful of shells."

IT WAS past midafternoon, when Peter Parker again went back to his home. Mrs. Morales met him in the big room and said: "W'ere ees Mees June?"

"June? I dunno—gone some place?"

"She no come down. I wait br'akfast ver' late. She no come, I call her. No spik to me. I open door—nobody. Nobody, too, sleep een her beds."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Parker. "You mean to say that June didn't sleep in her bed last night? That she's—gone?"

"*Si, Senor;* I can' find her. She don' leeve here las' night, because nobody sleep on her beds."

"What on earth happened?" asked Parker.

"*Quien sabe, senor.* These morning I fin' this een the patio."

She held out an ornate, tortoise-shell comb, studded with semi-precious stones. The comb was a favorite of June's. Parker stared at it, took it in his hand and looked closely at it.

Mrs. Morales said, "She w'ar those comb mos' all the time, *senor.* She w'ar eet las' night, too."

"Yeah," said Parker. "She wouldn't go away, without saying—and not all night. She wouldn't do that. Maybe she went out this morning. Made her own bed, eh?"

"No, *senor.* I mak' those bed. Nobody mak' the bed jus' like me. I know w'at I do. Sometheen 'appen to the *senorita.*"

Parker turned and left the house, going straight to the sheriff's office, where he found Dan Hogue and Smoky West. They

[*Turn page*]

had been talking about the appointment of Buck Corbett as the new ramrod for the Cross L. Parker came in and rested both hands on the desk, as he talked to the sheriff.

"June's missin'," he said huskily. "After our meetin' last night, when I came back up to the Tomahawk, she was home. I told her to go to bed. She never slept in that bed last night, and we can't find her. Mrs. Morales found her favorite comb in the patio this mornin'—where she lost it. She wore it last night."

The sheriff stared blankly at Parker. "You mean—somethin' has happened to her, Parker?"

"Don't ask me anythin'—I don't know. That dumb woman knew it hours ago, but didn't tell me. We've got to find her, Dan."

"Sure, sure!" agreed the sheriff. "Saddle the horse, Smoky. But where can we look, Parker?"

"Heaven only knows, I don't," replied Parker helplessly. "I'll get the boys at the Bar Seventy. You and Smoky go to the Eighty-Eight and get the boys, while I go to the Bar Seventy. We may need enough men to sweep the valley. We don't know where to look; so we'll look everywhere."

They had been gone about thirty minutes, when Rory McLeod, Old Huckleberry Bill and the two men from the Arrowhead came into town, traveling fast. They jerked their horses up at the sheriff's office, but the place was locked.

Rory said, "Ike, you find Doc Kenton and send him out to the ranch—fast. Tell him what happened. I'll find out where the sheriff is."

Rory soon found out enough to know that the sheriff, deputy and Peter Parker had ridden away a half-hour ago, but no one knew where they had gone. Rory said, "Here comes Ike. Did yuh find the doctor, Ike?"

Ike nodded, "He's on his way, boss."

"We're headin' for the Cross L," snarled Rory, "and I hope some of Parker's coyotes try to stop us."

NEXT MONTH

SIX-GUNS SING AT NIGHT

An Exciting Novelet

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AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER V

Bullets Of Death

CORBETT was in no hurry to reach the Cross L. As he went slowly along the crooked road, already in sight of the high cliffs behind the Cross L, he tried to puzzle out the reasons for Parker to hire him. And why did he fire Cassino? There was a definite reason for all of it, but the solution had escaped him so far.

The road twisted around a rocky outcropping, where the brush grew close to the road. Suddenly Buck's horse threw up its head, and the next moment plunged flat, pinning part of Buck's left leg. The fall stunned Buck for the moment, but he heard the smashing report of a gun.

Buck was on his left side, his right arm free. A man was running down the road toward him, a rifle in his hands. Buck drew a deep, choking breath, swung his gun hand around and shot point-blank at the running man, who had tried to stop and lift his rifle, but too late. He spun on one heel, almost completely around, and went flat on his face.

Buck managed to draw his foot from under the dead horse, which had been shot through the head, probably saving Buck's life. He limped a little, as he went over and turned the man on his back. He was Lou Miles, one of the Cross L men whom Buck had encountered on the road after his ride to Hellgate Pass. Buck turned him over and left him.

"Another miss for Parker," he said aloud, but amended it with, "Or maybe Slim Cassino. *Quien sabe?*"

Buck wasn't greatly concerned over killing Miles. If he hadn't, Miles would have killed him. Merely a case of survival of the fastest—or the luckiest. He couldn't find Miles' horse, so went on afoot. But Buck was sufficiently warned now. No more going bold. There would be more rifles at the Cross L, and men to handle them. No longer was he interested in becoming the ramrod of the Cross L, but he was going to find out what was going on in Hellgate Valley. It would be dark in less than an hour—and maybe darkness would help him a lot.

Peter Parker rode in at the Bar 70, but found only Nick Ellers, the foreman there. He told Nick, who saddled quickly, asking no questions until he was in the saddle, when he asked:

"What have yuh in mind, boss?"

"Nick, I don't know. Something draws me to the Cross L."

"Yuh mean—Buck Corbett?"

"Who knows, Nick? Let's go."

The sheriff and deputy found Sam McInnis and two of his men at the 88, and they saddled quickly. McInnis was also curious as to just where the sheriff had in mind.

He said, "Parker had the Cross L in mind, Sam. I don't know why."

"Buck Corbett, maybe."

"He loves June Parker," said Smoky. It was a long sentence for Smoky.

Sam McInnis said, "In spite of yore strong arguments, Smoky, we'll go there. Maybe we better swing over to the Bar Seventy, and see if Parker is still there."

But Parker and Nick Ellers had gone. The cook said, "I dunno where they was goin', but they mentioned the Cross L."

"We've lost time," complained the sheriff. "I thought surely they'd head for there."

Rory McLeod, Huckleberry Bill and the two cowboys made no stops, which put them a little ahead of Parker and Ellers. But while the four men rode at a moderate pace, Parker and Ellers were not wasting time. Rory heard them coming, and the four rode off into a thicket, letting the two riders gallop past. It was almost dark, but they recognized Parker because of his big, long-legged horse, hands higher than any animal in the valley.

"The devil's on foot tonight," declared Rory. "When Peter the Great rides at that speed, somethin' is wrong."

They swung in behind them and rode quietly. From where they halted to let Parker and Ellers past, it was less than a half-mile to where Buck had shot Miles. . . .

IT WAS getting quite dark, when Buck Corbett worked his way through the brush behind the Cross L ranchhouse. There was not a light in the house, and everything was ominously quiet. Taking advantage of every bit of cover Buck made his way to but a short distance from the ranch-house. So far as he knew there might be a dozen guns waiting for him, but that was a chance he had to take. Getting to his feet he raced for the house, zig-zagging his way, making himself a difficult target in that light.

But nothing happened. The kitchen door was unlocked. Quietly he eased inside and closed the door. It was very dark in there, as he investigated. Satisfied that no one was in there, he lighted a match, shielding it with his hands. On a big table in the main room was a jug of whisky, and twelve used glasses. The odor of tobacco smoke and stale whisky was pronounced. Men had been there but a short time before Buck's arrival.

Buck had been in the Cross L before Parker bought it, but he was not too familiar with the layout. At the rear of the house he found a locked door to what was apparently a store-room. He went back to the main room, where he had seen a steel bar beside the fireplace, and the breaking of the cheap padlock was no problem.

Huddled on a pile of old blankets, roped, gagged and blindfolded was June Parker. Buck lighted a match and looked at her, in amazement. It was ridiculous to think of her being out here, and in this condition. The match burned his fingers. There was an old stable lantern in there, with enough oil to afford some illumination, and in a few moments June was loose, the gag torn away. He looked down at her, holding the lantern to illuminate his own dirty face, and she recognized him. He heard her whisper, "Buck," and he said, "Yeah, but if this ain't a dream."

He left the lantern with her and went back to the front door. He could hear cattle bawling, and then he heard the sound of distant shots.

"This," he quietly told the world, "is going to be an awful good place for a woman not to be," and went back to June. . . .

Rory McLeod, Huckleberry Bill and the others had followed Parker and Ellers only a short distance, when shooting broke out ahead of them. They jerked up for a moment, and Rory said:

"Somethin' wrong ahead, lads! Shake 'em up a bit!"

They broke into a swift gallop, guns ready. The light was bad, as they pounded

down the rather narrow, brush-lined road. Guns flashed ahead, but the four men did not slacken their pace. A bullet nicked Old Bill's hat, and he swore joyfully as he blazed back at the flash. The road seemed full of men and horses, and no one knew friend from foe.

Only one man, it seemed, was going away at racing speed, as the four men swung out of their saddles. Cautiously Rory McLeod began lighting matches. Here was Lou Miles, where Buck had left him; Nick Ellers, groaning with a broken shoulder. Rory said:

"Wonders will never cease, it seems. What next?"

"Here's two," called Bill. "I don't know 'em, and they're cold enough to skate on."

"He-e-ey!" yelled Ike Devlin. "Take a look at this, will yuh?"

Piled up beside the road was Peter the Great's tall horse, and, pinned under the dead horse was Peter the Great, blood on his beard, his eyes glaring up at them. Rory laughed down at him and Parker cursed him back many generations.

"You'll pay for this, McLeod," swore Parker. "You bushed us, you dirty murderer!"

"Ye don't say?" replied the old Scot. "That's wonderful. So we bushed ye, eh? And when it comes to payment, what about Tony Ortega, the boy ye shot to ribbons this day, Parker."

Parker stared at McLeod. "You're crazy, McLeod."

"Aye. And why not, after all your thievin' and murderin'. You and yore gang murdered John Corbett and this day ye shot down as fine a boy as ever pounded leather. You've stolen almost every cow from the Arrowhead and the JMC, and ye speak of me payin' a price to the likes of you, Pete Parker."

PARKER blinked, as more matches were lighted and the men worked, moving the horse, so that Parker could be pulled free. He gritted his teeth, but made no sound. One of the men caught a saddled horse that was standing nearby and led it up to them.

Rory said, "Can ye ride, you old wolf?"

"I think my leg's busted," replied Parker, "but I'll ride."

"Ye will," promised Rory. "And when this shindig's over, you'll hang to, the rafters of your own ranchhouse, Pete Parker."

"I'm not afraid of your rope, McLeod, and I'm danged if I know what this is all about. My daughter is missin', and all I want is to find her. If Buck Corbett took her out here—"

"Ye mean—June is missin'?" asked Rory.

"Since last night," groaned Parker. "We're searchin'—"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Bill. "Hold fast, old-timer!"

Peter Parker slumped in his saddle, and would have fallen, except that Huckleberry Bill grabbed him in time. Swiftly the old man swapped horses, sliding in behind Parker's saddle.

"Somebody lead my horse," he ordered, "I've got to hold this big rannahan in his saddle."

"Good!" barked Rory. "We can't lose him now. But was he lyin' about June?"

"Prob'ly was," replied Old Bill. "It's a habit with him—lyin'."

A few minutes after they left, Dan Hogue, Smoky West and Sam McInnis ran into the battlefield. Except for the two dead horses in the narrow road they might have gone past without seeing the men on the ground.

Their amazement knew no bounds. Here was Nick Ellers, not dead, but badly hurt, Lou Miles, dead, Peter Parker's horse, piled up in the brush beside the road. Further on were two strangers to Hellgate Valley, with one-way tickets to an undetermined destination. Smoky West swore quietly, as he looked at them.

He said, "What are they doin' here? The last I heard they was workin' for Zell Lorimer's spread in Lost River."

"This is no time for wonderin', Smoky," said the sheriff. "Somethin' has happened to Pete Parker. Let's go!". . .

June was on her feet, trying to work circulation back into her arms and legs, when Buck came back. In the weak light of the dirty lantern they looked at each other.

Buck said, "June, what happened to you?"

"I—I don't know," she replied painfully. "Two men caught me in the patio, after that meeting last night. They said they wouldn't hurt me, if I didn't make trouble. Buck, it was a nightmare. Nobody knew

where I was. Why did they do it, Buck?"

"I don't know—yet. Was one of the men Slim Cassino?"

"I—I think so. They tried to disguise their voices, but I'm sure Cassino was one of them. Where am I?"

"This is the Cross L, June, and—wait!"

A running horse came into the yard of the ranchhouse, and a man came clattering across the steps, banging against the door. Buck stepped into the main room, as the man flung the door open and barked, "Where's everybody? Hang it, the deal went wrong! Get out here, you fools—they're comin'! They got Mike and Eddie, and—where's everybody?"

He banged the door shut, as a bunch of riders swept into the place, and went running toward them, yelling a warning. Buck ran over and barred the door, and went swiftly into the dark kitchen, where he managed to find the bar for that door. There was a babel of voices outside, as men ran for the doorway of the ranchhouse, but found it barred. June was trying to find her way into the main room.

"Keep down, June—there'll be fightin' pretty quick," Buck said. "They're back and I've barred the doors."

"What was that man saying?" she whispered.

"Somethin' about their deal goin' wrong —and somebody comin'."

Men tried to crash the front door, but Buck smashed a bullet through about waist-high, and a man yelled painfully. However, they quit trying to crash it open, and proceeded to splinter the door with bullets.

BUCK forced June to lie down on the floor to escape the flying lead, and moved over close to a window. Men were all around the house, cursing, arguing. One man said:

"Buck Corbett's in there, and we've got to get him!"

Buck shoved the muzzle of his forty-five through the glass and shot at the sound of the voice. A man yelled sharply, and another voice said, "I told yuh he was," and proceeded to knock out all the glass from that window. Splinters flew from the opposite wall, and a picture crashed, the wire broken.

"Buck, are you all right?" called June anxiously.

"All right," he replied. "Keep down and crawl over here."

Bullets were coming from several directions, but rather high, when June reached Buck near the window. A man got in close and fired through another window, but quit with a choking cry when Buck snapped a shot at the flash of his gun.

"Why are they doing all this?" whispered June. "I don't understand what it is all about. My father owns this ranch."

Buck heard the bullet smack into the wall close to his knee, but he didn't realize for the moment that June had been hurt. He spoke to her, but she didn't reply. His searching hand found her hair, and it was sticky with blood.

Buck's heart sank into his boots. He grasped her in both hands and worked his way into the little kitchen, away from those smashed window. Taking a long chance he lighted a match, shielding it closely, and looked at her. The bullet had furrowed her scalp just above her right ear, and the concussion had knocked her out. Thankful that it was no worse, Buck heaved a sigh of relief. And along with that deep breath he got a whiff of wood smoke.

Things were very quiet outside now. Buck slid to his knees, all senses alerted. He could hear it now—a crackling sound, and a swirl of wood smoke came through the broken windows. The ranchhouse had been fired. Dry as any tinder, it was like setting fire to a box of matches. Buck knew that it would only be a matter of minutes, until the whole house would be an inferno.

They would be covering every exit with rifles. The room was fast filling with choking smoke, and he could see the light from the flames, already licking above the broken windows. It gave him a little illumination, as the flame flickered along the worn floor of the dirty kitchen.

June was unconscious, oblivious to what was in store for her. Buck had made his decision. He would take June in his arms and kick open that kitchen door. If this was the end of all things, a bullet is more merciful than flames. He would go down fighting, and there always was a chance of a miracle.

The flames brightened the kitchen, and Buck, as he got ready for his dash, saw a

metal ring on the floor, almost under the table. A cellar! A possible avenue to life!

CHAPTER VI

Rustlers' Secret

QUICKLY he flung the table aside, and yanked up the small trap-door. A musty smell greeted his nostrils. It was only about five feet deep. A hastily lighted match disclosed an outside door, which likely hadn't been used for years. Cobwebs hung three feet long from the ceiling. Swiftly he tested the old door with a jab of his shoulder. It was unfastened. Dirt sifted in on him, but he sprang back and crawled into the kitchen. Men were shooting, yelling, cursing outside. Buck smiled grimly. Let 'em shoot and curse. He had found a way out, and none of them would watch that cellar doorway.

He slid into the hole and gently drew June down with him. The kitchen was well lighted now, and smoke whirled in, backed by searing flames, as he dropped the trap-door. There seemed to be an awful lot of shooting going on, and he could hear the thud of running hoofs.

He shoved that door up and open with a shoulder. Smoke whirled around him, as he staggered up the short incline, carrying June with one arm, his gun swinging in his right hand. He could hardly see in the swirling smoke, which choked him, filled his eyes with tears. He ran a few steps and went sprawling.

A heavy body crashed into him, driving his face into the dirt, and he heard men yelling.

He tried to get up, but hands forced him down again. Men were yelling something about finding the girl. Buck tried to get his face out of the dirt and tell them what happened to her, but they wouldn't let him.

There was another voice, a very familiar one, which said:

"Let him up, or I'll salivate yuh all! I tell yuh, he didn't steal her, you fools!"

They let Buck sit up and he gasped, "Bill! Where are yuh, Bill?"

Men were all around him, plain in the light from the blazing ranchhouse. Buck had his eyes full of smoke and dirt and his vision was rather blurred. More men were coming, and one of them was Peter the Great. He didn't look great now. He was dirty and torn, his beard matted with blood, limping, panting. A man yelled;

"We got Cassino!"

"Glad—yuh—got—him," panted Buck. "He's—bad."

"What do yuh mean?" rasped Peter the Great. "Explain this, if you can, you dog!"

"Parker, you've been a blind fool," panted Buck. "Cassino has been usin' the Cross L as a rustler's hangout. He's been stealin' from everybody, and mostly from you, Parker, stackin' 'em on this ranch, and sendin' 'em through the pass you trusted him to watch. He abducted June last night, because she heard him and somebody else talkin'. She knew too much. I found her here, after Lou Miles failed to dry-gulch me on the road."

"I think you lie," declared Parker hoarsely. "I think—"

More men shoved their way into the group, and they were bringing Slim Cassino, dirty, bloody, cursing all of them. A man said;

"Parker, we got Zell Lorimer. He's out there in the yard, and his gang are mostly there."

"It's Zell Lorimer, Parker," assured the sheriff. "I knew him."

"We're havin' quite a party," said Buck. "Go ahead and talk, Cassino; maybe they'll give you a short rope."

"You may as well talk, Slim," said Parker tensely.

"Talk about what?" asked Cassino bitterly.

"About all these dead men, the burned ranchhouse—you," said Buck. "We know you've been dealin' with Zell Lorimer, Slim. You can't deny that. I saw you at Hellgate Pass, yuh remember. You and Burke Travers controlled this end of the valley, and yuh stole everybody blind. What a set-up! You pulled the wool over Parker's eyes, and almost wrecked the valley. You had this deal all set, when Parker fired yuh. I mean, when Parker played that he fired yuh. I knew it was a lie, but I wanted to find out why. You had to keep me from comin' here, until you got them cows out through the Pass. Well, my friend, I came, anyway."

"If yuh don't know it," added Bill,

"Burke Travers is down by the corral, shot full of holes."

"All right," snarled Cassino. "Go ahead and prove it. I'm not talkin'!"

"I can prove some of it."

THE men jerked around. June was there, pale in the light of the flames, but standing alone. Peter the Great grasped her by the arm, but he was more unsteady than she.

"Slim, I recognized you last night," she said. "I knew you were no good, but I didn't think you'd harm me."

Cassino laughed harshly. "You knew too much, my dear."

"That, alone, convicts him," declared the sheriff. "All right, men, get busy. One of yuh head for town and get Doc Kenton. Have them bring enough wagons to take everybody back. Make it fast, will yuh, boys. What a mess!"

Rory McLeod and Peter Parker looked at each other in the light of the flames, looked a long time, before Parker slowly held out his hand.

"Rory," he said slowly, "we've been enemies a long time; I hope we'll be friends a lot longer. I've been a blind old fool."

"Ye have, Pete," agreed Rory soberly. "Maybe I've been one, too. Shake."

"Do I get in on this family reunion?" asked Huckleberry Bill. "I've hated yuh as much as he has, Pete."

"You are included, Bill," replied Peter the Great. "I'll make it up to the JMC and the Arrowhead—even if it breaks me."

June came close to Buck and they smiled at each other. They didn't need to say anything. Rory, Peter the Great and Old Bill were watching them.

"I didn't realize until tonight that I'm gettin' old," Peter the Great said. "Can't do the things I used to do—except to cuss and glare at folks. I need a young man to take over the Parker interests, and I've one in mind. Buck Corbett, this time it's on the square. Will you take over *all* the Parker interests and run 'em?"

"I dunno—mebbe," replied Buck quietly. "Right now, I'm only interested in the biggest part of the Parker interests."

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean, Buck. But I want yuh to know that I had nothin' to do with runnin' you out of the valley. It must have been Cassino. I can see it now."

"See what?" asked Buck, puzzled.

"I sent him away," said June firmly. "Buck, you can't understand. I—I got a note. It said that if Buck Corbett wasn't out of the valley within a week, he would be shot. I showed it to Dad, and he said—"

"I said they'd kill the young fool, as sure as fate."

"I didn't want you hurt, Buck; so I—"

"You told me yuh didn't love me," he said flatly.

"There's been an awful lot of lyin' done in this valley," said Old Bill soberly.

The sheriff and Smoky West walked away and went down past the nearly-burned ranchhouse. Men had gone to get the doctor and wagons, the battle was over. Dan Hogue, the sheriff, leaned against the corral fence and drew a deep breath.

"Smoky," he said, "you ain't said a word for an hour. Summin' up this whole deal, countin' the casualties, listenin' to the accusations and confessions—what do yuh think of it all?

Smoky rolled a cigarette carefully, shaping it nicely in the half-light. Then he lighted it and inhaled deeply. The others were coming down past the burning ruins. Smoky looked at the sheriff and said, "Huh."

That covered everything!

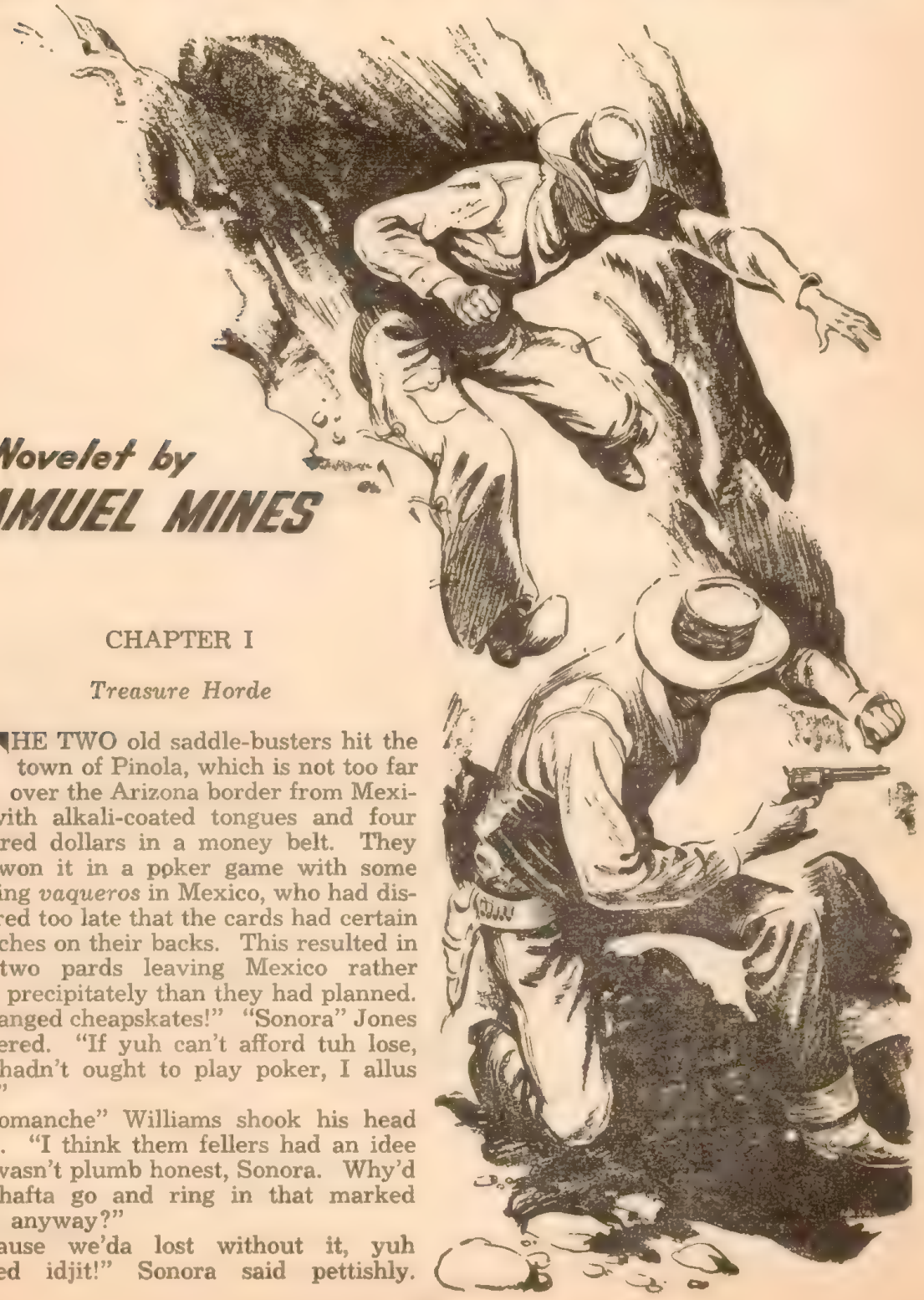
FEATURED NEXT MONTH

HAUNTED FOREST

A Thrill-Packed Walt Slade Novelet

By BRADFORD SCOTT

GOLD for a Killer



A Novelet by SAMUEL MINES

CHAPTER I

Treasure Horde

THE TWO old saddle-busters hit the town of Pinola, which is not too far over the Arizona border from Mexico, with alkali-coated tongues and four hundred dollars in a money belt. They had won it in a poker game with some trusting *vaqueros* in Mexico, who had discovered too late that the cards had certain scratches on their backs. This resulted in the two pards leaving Mexico rather more precipitately than they had planned.

"Danged cheapskates!" "Sonora" Jones muttered. "If yuh can't afford tuh lose, yuh hadn't ought to play poker, I allus says."

"Comanche" Williams shook his head sadly. "I think them fellers had an idee you wasn't plumb honest, Sonora. Why'd you hafta go and ring in that marked deck, anyway?"

"Cause we'da lost without it, yuh danged idjit!" Sonora said pettishly.

Two old desert rats follow the trail of Conquistador pelf—and come up with treasure they never expected!

"Them fellers had their own system of cheatin'. They'da taken yore underwear if I'da let 'em."

"They'da had to cut it offa me, then," Comanche reported. "Every time I lost a button I put a copper rivet in. She's cinched up so tight now it'll take a blacksmith to get me outa them."

"Just like yuh, yuh danged old Injun," Sonora snorted. "Don't yuh know it ain't ettyket to sleep in yore underwear?"

"Me valet forgot to pack me pajamas. And anyways, let Etty Ket sleep in what he likes and I'll sleep in what I likes."

"Yuh're just plum ignerrant!"

At the outskirts of Pinola, Sonora Jones drew rein. The more levelheaded of the two, if any such comparison could be applied to their helter-skelter mental processes, he usually did the planning.

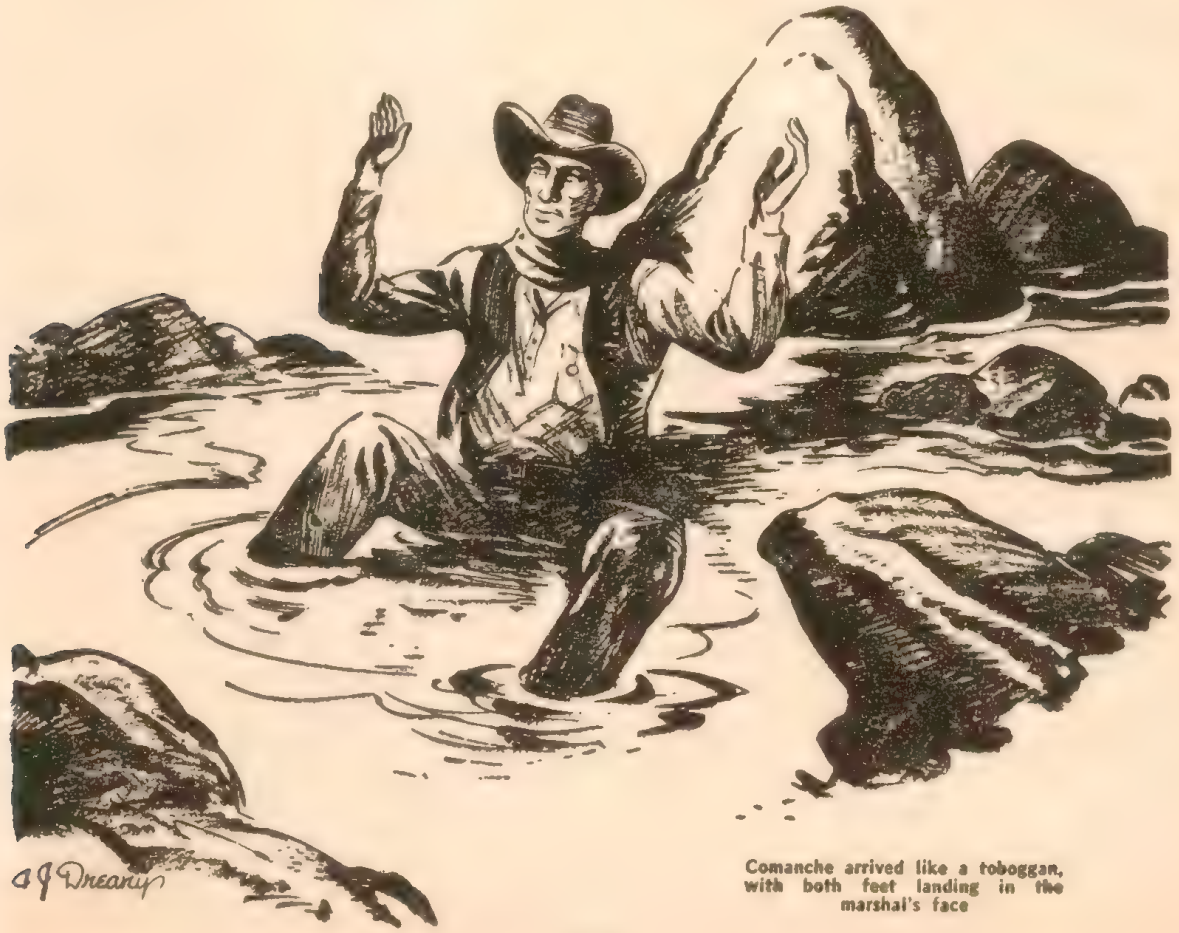
"Lissen," he said. "We got four hundred simoleons—which ain't much, but maybe it'll help the kid some."

The "kid" was a girl, eighteen-year-old Pearl Lyman, now orphaned and living alone on her Double L ranch, whom the two old hellions had adopted since the death of her parents, whose friends they had been.

"It'll mebbe buy some breeder stock, or dig a well or pay for an irrigation ditch," Sonora said. "So we ain't gonna spend a dollar of this on nose paint an' gettin' tossed in the clink an' fined everything we got. You hear me?"

"I hear yuh," Comanche said gloomily. "Though we could take that four hunnerd and run it up to—"

"We left that deck back in Mexico. An' the gamblers in this town knows more



Comanche arrived like a toboggan, with both feet landing in the marshal's face

tricks than we do. Now you hang on to this money belt. I'll buy some grub to pack out to the ranch, an' we'll go as soon as the horses has rested."

They separated then, Sonora riding on to the general store, while Comanche, who had no interest in supplies, checked his horse outside the Old Oaken Bucket Saloon and stared at the doors.

Dusk had fallen on Pinola, softening the harsh outlines of its one unlovely street. But Comanche was blind to the beauty of the evening. His prominent nose sniffed the odors of spirituous liquors which wafted gently from the premises of the Old Oaken Bucket and his Adam's apple bobbed thirstily.

He glanced stealthily up the road. Sonora had already disappeared in the shadows. Comanche slid out of saddle, dropped his reins and hobbled with haste into the saloon.

"Beer," he said to the bar swabber, laying a two-bit piece on the mahogany.

"Rotgut Sam," the bartender gave him a single glance of alarm, drew the beer and set it foaming before him.

"Ain't you afraid you'll overdo it, Comanche?" he sneered.

"You shet up," Comanche retorted weakly. He clutched his beer and retreated to a table where he sat down and began to sip it, determined to make it last.

A MAN sat near him, a lean man whose darkness was a sallow swarthiness rather than a healthy sun-weathering. This individual had hunted eyes that were never still. But he managed an ingratiating smile as he jerked a thumb at Comanche's beer.

"How about something a little more warming than that swill?" he suggested.

Comanche gulped. "Pardner," he said, "I'd like mighty well to drink with yuh, but it's only fair to warn yuh I can't buy my turn."

"Broke?"

"Course not!" Comanche bristled. "I got plenty. But I'm savin' it for seriouser things."

"Oh!" The dark man blinked and licked his lips nervously. "In that case, I'll buy anyway."

"We-e-ll, in that case," beamed Comanche. "You're a gent, suh."

A bottle and a half later they were fas friends. McNary was the dark man's name and he was a man with a burden.

"I'm carryin' around a secret," he con fided to Comanche.

Fascinated, the old rooster hitched hi chair closer.

"I've got the only map in the world t th' lost mine of Don Cabeza de Vaca," Mc Nary whispered.

"Cabez—"

"Came in with Cortez, or De Soto, for get which," McNary said. "Man, don't you remember? Them old Spanish don in fifty pounds of plate armour, ridin Arabian horses, hitting out through these deserts in search of the seven lost cities of Cibola? The cities of solid gold?"

A thrill ran along Comanche's whisky-warmed veins. He had a sudden visio of fabulous cities, with golden spires bla ing in the Arizona sun, of dusky maiden in gold-encrusted robes, with jewels sparkling in their black hair. He blinked dazzled eyes.

"You got a map to that mine?" he asked huskily.

"Sure! Everybody thought de Vac failed. Maybe he never did find any gold en cities. Likely they was just a story made up by the Apaches to keep the Spaniards riding on out of their territory. But he found a mine sure enough, with nuggets big as a man's fist!

"Look here." McNary gave another cautious look around, and suddenly produced an incredibly old, dirty, folded parchment. It was yellow and stained and shiny with years of handling. But the quaint Spanish script of another day was still legible upon it, and the date in fading letters, "1527."

Excitement bugged Comanche's eye balls. "Why you showin' me this?" he demanded.

"Because you look like an honest old desert rat," McNary said frankly. "An because I got to trust somebody."

"What you mean?"

"I mean I got the map, but I can't go." He struck himself lightly on the ches and gave a hollow cough. "I'm sick. I never live through a trek in that blazin desert. Only chance I got to cash in o this map is to sell it."

"How much is a map like that worth?"

"Five thousand, easy."

"Five thousand! Look, podner, there's a sartain element o' risk, you might say. How do I know there's a mine there? Give yuh four hundred."

Half an hour and six drinks later, Comanche passed over the money belt with their four hundred dollars in it and in return received the ancient, priceless map of Don Cabeza de Vaca, which stated in faded, but still flowery and legible terms, the way through the deserts to his lost gold mine.

"It's the best deal you ever made in your life," McNary said warmly. "You're a rich man now, Comanche."

"Me and my pard—Oh, my gosh!" Comanche groaned. "I forgot all about Sonora. He'll skin me alive. I gotta—"

AT THIS exact juncture, the doors slapped open violently and Sonora Jones stalked into the Old Oaken Bucket, feathers ruffled like a fighting rooster.

"There yuh are, yuh danged old *pelado*!" he screeched. "Lappin' up the firewater after what I told yuh, and me waitin' on yuh up to the store with—"

"Sonora, wait!" Comanche struggled through the tables to his partner's side and gripped his skinny arm. "Quit your caterwauling, you blasted catamount! I just made us the best doggoned deal in the world. We're rich, son, rich!"

"Yeh? I suppose you sold a part interest in that hot air you're spoutin' to a balloon manufacturer!"

"Will yuh lissen?" Comanche groaned.

The door opened again, catching Sonora in the middle of the back.

"I'm coming in," said a girl's voice, "if you're not coming out!"

"Pearl!" they both cried.

The girl came through the entrance. She was a pretty little thing, with short, brown hair and hazel eyes. She was dressed, like everyone else in that country, in a much-washed plaid cotton shirt and blue denims, neither of which could completely disguise a very interesting figure.

"What's the palaver about?" she demanded. "Hello, Comanche, you old sinner! What have you been up to?"

"Pearl, honey, you're a sight for sore eyes!" He hugged her enthusiastically. "Say, is that dude with you, as per usual?"

"Right behind you," growled a man's voice.

A huge young man, well over six feet, dressed in whipcord jacket and breeches and laced boots, towered over him. He was an Eastern mining engineer named Perry Cullman, and had been smitten with the tender passion at first sight of Pearl Lyman.

"Perry and you, gal, come on over here," Comanche ordered, dragging them all to an empty table. No one worried about Pearl having no business in a saloon. They thought of her more as a boy than a girl anyway, and were apt to forget the niceties of Western custom.

Talking volubly, Comanche took out his map and spread it flat on the table. Four heads came together as they bent over it.

"Golly!" Pearl breathed. "A gold mine! Is it real, Comanche?"

"Is it real? Guaranteed!" Comanche bragged.

Suspicion gripped Sonora. "What'd you give for this here map?"

"Why the feller asked five thousand simoleons," Comanche said, grinning. "But I outsmarted him. I only give—" He gulped in sudden remembrance.

"You only give what?"

"All we had," Comanche said weakly. "Four hundred."

Sonora's color ran through the reds and mounted into purple. The veins in his forehead swelled to alarming proportions. "Y-you give away—"

"Wait, Sonora," the girl pleaded, tugging at his arm. "Maybe it's the real McCoy! It sure looks good. So old and Spanishy and everything. Perry, what do you think?"

The engineer was studying the map, nose wrinkled as though he were smelling something bad. He picked the sheet up and held it against the light, shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Comanche and Sonora said together.

Cullman laid the map down and sighed. "Better kiss your money good-by, boys." His finger rested on the date in the ancient Spanish script. "See this? It says fifteen twenty-seven, doesn't it?" They all nodded. "Well, if the paper were made after that date the map couldn't be genuine, could it?"

He held it up to the light and they all saw the watermark plainly—"1882."

"I feel sick," Comanche said feebly, as Cullman put the map down.

He got up and staggered to the door. The others followed him, Sonora with mayhem in his stiff-legged stride. Outside, a scuffling sound in the alley at one side attracted Sonora's desert-keen ears.

"No—no!" came a gasping whisper. "Two-Spot—don't!"

Then a harsh growl that lifted the hair on the listeners' heads.

"Gimme—yuh double-crossing skunk!"

"I didn't take it—I swear it!" the other voice screamed. "Help! Help!"

A vivid lance of flame stabbed the darkness, lighting up the hunched, terror-stricken figure of McNary, backing away from a huge shape that advanced upon him. The spear of flame seemed to reach out and lick at McNary from the other man's hand, and as it touched, the swarthy man was flung back and crumpled upon himself.

Comanche whirled and grabbed Sonora and Pearl with shaking hands.

"Run!" he whispered. "D-don't ask questions, j-just run!"

CHAPTER II

Double-crosser's Pay

TWO-SPOT BARBOUR was an outlaw without any handicaps of honor or conscience except where he himself was concerned. If he wanted to double-cross an associate, that was business. If someone double-crossed him, however, that was a killing matter.

Thus Two-Spot considered his shooting his two partners in the holdup of the Union Pacific express good business. Instead of splitting forty-thousand dollars three ways, he had it all to himself.

Having disposed of the two grizzled old outlaws who were with him, and who, strangely enough, bore a superficial resemblance to Sonora and Comanche, Two-Spot thoughtfully buried them on the desert. He wanted no unnecessary evidence lying about. Moreover, he had a strong feeling that Abe Chambers, Deputy U.S. Marshal, was somewhere behind him.

This impression was substantiated when, from a high mesa the next day, he saw a black dot crawling across the desert on his trail. Two-Spot cursed in sudden fear.

"Danged bloodhound!" he muttered. "Didn't know he was so close!"

There was danger now. For Abe Chambers was no man to underestimate. The first thing was to get rid of his heavy burden of gold-bearing bank notes. He knew of a little cave in this rugged, broken country and he headed for it to cache his bloodstained loot. That done, he covered his tracks and lighted away from there fast.

But the delays had cost him dearly. He gave Abe Chambers a good run until his canteen went dry, and then he was caught. The marshal, a rugged, stocky man as tough as a desert horned toad, gnawed his mustache and watched the subdued, sun-blackened outlaw gulp down the few swallows of tepid water he was allowed.

"Talk, Barbour," he said. "Tell me where the gold notes is and mebbe it'll be a mite easier for you."

"Yuh can't prove a thing," Barbour croaked.

"I know you did that job."

"Knowin' it ain't provin' it."

"Barbour, we've got enough on you to send you to Yuma for ten years, anyway. Want to go on that basis?"

The outlaw stood pat. Why confess to anything else? If they sent him up for other crimes he might get some time off for good behavior, and when he got out there would be forty-thousand dollars waiting for him. He shut his bear-trap jaw and went to Yuma without talking.

As the years dragged by, Two-Spot began to be troubled by a fear that he might forget the location of his buried cache. Prison did things to a man. How to make sure of his treasure?

He got an idea. There was a forger in the prison, a gifted man with a pen. They smuggled in a piece of parchment, which the forger cunningly aged and antiqued. Then on this parchment he drew, at Two-Spot's direction, a map to his hiding place. Only, he embellished it with Spanish flourishes and marked it as the lost mine of the old Spanish explorer, Don Cabeza de Vaca.

For more years, Barbour carried this

map next to his skin until it was shiny with age and the rubbing of his oily hide. Despite his best care and secrecy, however, one man did find out about the map—another convict, named McNary. And when McNary left Yuma, the map went with him.

Barbour's rage was murderous when he discovered the theft. And at once he carried out the prison break he had been planning tentatively ever since he had entered the prison. Leaving two dead guards behind him, and filled with hate and murder, he roared southward on McNary's trail. Two other escaped convicts were with him.

He caught up with the thief in the Old Oaken Bucket, and having determined to his own satisfaction that McNary no longer had the map, snuffed him out as a lesson to double-crossers.

He evaded the mob which poured from the saloon, mixed with others on the street, and by dint of listening and asking a discreet question or two learned that McNary, shortly before his death, had been talking with an old desert rat named Comanche Williams, whose headquarters, when in Pinola, was the Double L Ranch.

It was all the tip Two-Spot needed. Ten minutes later, he was aboard his cayuse and headed out on the road which led to Pearl Lyman's ranch.

SOMEWHAT out of breath, the two desert rats and their friends reached the Double L without letting any grass grow under their hoofs. Sonora tended to the horses while Pearl made coffee and Cullman lit the lamps. When they were gathered together again in the living room, with coffee cups balanced on their knees, Sonora took a fresh grip on his patience and asked the question he had been holding in for an hour.

"Now, you dad-blasted old spendthrift, talk up! What's all this about?"

Comanche's cup rattled on the saucer as he lowered it from his bristly jaw, having drained the scalding liquid at a single gulp.

"Spendthrift, hey?" he cackled triumphantly. "Well, did you see a man kilt over this here map tonight? Still think it's a fake?"

"How do we know he was kilt over the map?" Sonora demanded.

"Stop it, Sonora," Pearl begged. "Let Comanche tell his story."

"That there is a genuwine old Spanish map," Comanche shrilled.

"But the watermark—"

"I don't give a hoot about the watermark. The date on the map has gotta be right. And I'm headin' out to find that lost mine. Sonora, you coming along?"

"I'm going too," Pearl said hastily, before Sonora could answer.

"Comanche, you're being stubborn," Perry Cullman said. "That map *can't* be genuine."

"Then why was McNary killed?" Comanche demanded.

No one could answer that. And their collective doubts began to waver before Comanche's assuredness.

"It'll be like old times again, huntin' gold treasure," Comanche said dreamily. "Mind the time we made that strike in the Sierra Madres and took out forty pounds of dust in a month?"

"That's ancient hist'ry," Sonora said crossly.

"We wuz countin' our wealth and dreamin' of the ranch we would have," Comanche said dreamily. "The biggest ranch in Arizona, with plenty of wells and grass higher'n the cow critters' bellies and enough cowpokes to work them so's all we had to do was sit on the porch in our Sunday clothes takin' it easy."

"Jest as we was at the pinochle of success, the bubble busted," Sonora threw in. "It was busted, to be exact, by a war party of Apaches that came hellin' up the canyon plumb bent on collectin' our scalps."

Comanche fingered a ragged scar over one ear. "They come that close to collectin' mine," he said, "not to mention scarin' me outa ten years of growth. Me an' Sonora burned powder like a regiment of artillery and then lit a shuck for the hills afoot, leavin' our horses and gold and everything behind us. Somehow, we lost the redskins. Next morning, we snuk back, hopin' mebbe they hadn't got our horses. Glory be, they hadn't! But the gold was gone, the which I thought plumb pecooliar, sence I never knowed an Apache was interested in filthy mazuma."

Comanche was lost in thought a moment. Then he said, "I was moonin' over

our loss when Sonora calls me. 'Comanche,' he says, 'how many Injuns would you say was in that raidin' party last night?'

" 'Oh', I sez, 'ten or twelve.'

" 'Don't you think,' Sonora sez, 'that many Injuns oughta have left some tracks?'

"I takes a look at the ground and my hair rises right up offa my head. There ain't a horse track on the ground! And in spite of all the shootin' that went on, there ain't an exploded cattridge, except the forty-fives from our pistols.

" 'Ghosts!' I sez. 'Injun ghosts, warnin' us offa their medicine ground! Partner, let's slope!' "

"Sonora agrees, for the fust time in his life, and we pull our freight pronto. We want no truk with Injun ghosts."

"Gosh!" said Perry Cullman. "Were they really ghosts, Comanche?"

"You're doggone right they were! And there's only one thing bothering me," the old desert rat said musingly. "If they were ghosts, how'd they lug off all that gold? And how'd they give me this?" He touched the scar over his ear.

"Jeepers!" Pearl exclaimed. "You're making me creepy! If these old mines are haunted, let's not go annoying the ghosts. I don't want any ghosts mad at me. Perry—Say, what's the matter with you?"

The engineer's eyes were protruding. "The door," he whispered.

Like two parts of a well-oiled mechanism, Sonora and Comanche whirled, gnarled old hands slapping leather. Too late. The door smashed in under the thrust of a heavy foot.

"Don't move!" snarled a voice.

In the opening, six-gun leveled, was framed the dark-browed, glowering figure of Two-Spot Barbour.

NO ONE moved, except that Sonora and Comanche moved their hands, carefully and stiffly, away from their guns. Two-Spot slithered forward like a dust-covered grizzly, his bearded face and red-rimmed eyes furthering the likeness. An extended left hand plucked the guns from the partners' holsters, while the right kept them carefully covered.

Barbour tossed the pistols contemptuously into a far corner. A single glance assured him he had nothing to fear in the way of weapons from Pearl and the young mining engineer. He straightened up near the doorway, his scowling, ferocious glare menacing them all.

"There's a leetle matter of a map between us," he stated. "An old Spanish map. I want it! Which one of you sin-pocked old buzzard-baits is knowed as Comanche?"

"I am," Comanche growled.

"Then yuh're the old cuss was talkin' to a jigger named McNary in the saloon tonight!"

"McNary? Don't rec'llect nobody by that name."

"If there's one thing I hates," Barbour announced coldly, "it's a liar. A man who'd lie would jest as lief steal, and I ain't got no use for a thief. 'Specially a map thief. Reckon I'll salivate you."

"Hold on!" Comanche gulped. "I'm too young to die. Cain't we talk this over?"

"I want that map!" Two-Spot grated. "I reckon you've got it cached on yore ornery old hide. Shuck that shirt!"

Comanche cast appealing eyes at his comrades, but they were helpless. Two-Spot's finger twitched on the trigger. Slowly, Comanche fumbled the buttons, making it last as long as he dared, and at length peeled off his shirt.

"Toss it here," Barbour ordered. He caught the flung garment and examined it carefully, making sure no map was hidden or sewn in its folds.

"Yore boots next," he ordered.

Painfully Comanche lifted one foot after the other, hauled off his rundown footgear and tossed it across to the outlaw. Barbour examined each boot in turn, and with muttered curses flung them into the corner where the partner's six-guns were lying.

"Yore pants next," he ordered.

"Hey," Comanche protested, blushing, "ain't you forgettin' there's a lady present?"

"The lady kin turn her back!" Barbour roared. "Git out'n them levis pronto afore I shoots them offa yore skinny shanks!"

Despairingly, Comanche cast the look of a doomed man at Pearl. The girl, her face gone pale, turned her back and Perry Cullman put his arms around her. Comanche slipped off his dusty levis and

stood up in his long underwear, grotesque as a heron. The copper rivets fastening the underwear winked in the lamplight.

Barbour investigated the levis and with a muffled roar flung them after the boots.

"All right, yuh plucked rooster," he growled, "this is your last chance. Off with that form-fittin' nightgown yuh're wearin'!"

Comanche's grizzled hair stood on end. "That's goin' too blamed far! Yuh kin shoot me, but I'll be double-danged if I'm takin' off the last thing between me and my modesty with a gal in the house. Go ahead an' shoot!"

"I will," Barbour said, raising his gun.

"Besides," Comanche shrilled, "I cain't *get* it off! It's riveted on!"

Barbour slipped a long sheath knife from his belt with his left hand.

"I'll cut it off yore carcass," he said.

The cornered oldster stood his ground, eyes hunted. His pal Sonora gathered himself for a lunge at the big outlaw. Then he stiffened and his head came up.

"Hoofbeats!" he said.

Barbour became motionless. Every ear in the room strained to listen. A faint rataplan of hoofs swept quickly nearer. Barbour glided backwards to the door and moved it open. The hoofbeats were louder. A faint hail came in on the night air.

"Abe Chambers!" Barbour said venomously. He whirled to menace the room with his Colt. "I'm comin' back," he snarled.

Then he darted into the night and was instantly swallowed up by the darkness.

CHAPTER III

A U.S. Marshal Brings Trouble

A SIGH of relief burst from the girl as she started to free herself of Cullman's arms and turn, to be checked by a wail from Comanche.

"Wait!" he yelped, and dived for his pants. He had them on and was struggling into his boots when the hoofbeats swept up to the front of the ranchhouse.

Sonora shoved the door wide open with his foot. "Come in fast and duck outa the lights, stranger!" he called. "There's an outlaw out in that bresh . . . Pearl, honey, pull down them blinds!"

A grizzled, stocky man with a moustache ducked into the room and blinked in the light. His left hand swept back a lapel to reveal a silver badge.

"Abe Chambers, Deputy U.S. Marshal," he announced. His gaze lighted on Sonora and Comanche, now struggling with his shirt. "Who're you two?"

"Sonora and Comanche?" Pearl giggled. "I'll vouch for them, Mr. Marshal."

"They look uncommon like Barbour's two hellions that helped him hold up the Union Pacific express six years ago," the officer growled. "I'll take yore word ma'am that you know the two, but if I find out they been leadin' double lives I'll skin them fer the tallow."

"Yuh're talkin' to law-abidin' citizens," Comanche protested. "An' we demand protection from the law. That Two-Spot Barbour was jest here, threatenin' us!"

"Like this?" the marshal asked softly. His gun had magically appeared and Comanche, bewildered, was all but sniffing the end of it. "I say you're Texas Sam and Holy Joe, Barbour's side-kicks who held up the Union Pacific and beefed the messenger six years ago. We never could pin that job on Barbour, but now that I got you two I'll surer than sin sweat a confession outa you. Get your hands up, you sin-blasted old flea hotel!"

Comanche's arms shot skyward again. "Yuh're makin' a confounded mistake!" he squawked indignantly. "This is hoomiliating, an honest citizen bein' treated like a danged criminal! I'll write to the President about this!"

"They only let you write one letter a month in jail!" Chambers snarled. "Now talk up! Where'd Barbour go? Fast!" The gun muzzle jabbed at Comanche's nose.

To one side, Sonora, bristling like a mountain cat, was sliding closer to the officer. For the moment Chambers did not seem to notice him, but suddenly he whirled, and Sonora nearly fell over a chair getting back out of reach.

But it was as he turned back to Comanche that catastrophe befell Chambers. Comanche had only one boot on, the other lying on a chair alongside him. As the officer's attention turned from him, the old cowpoke snatched up the boot. And

as Chambers turned, he was just in time to meet it coming down upon the top of his head.

In a trice the officer was disarmed, his wrists yanked behind him and tied. The two old reprobates straightened up with triumphant sighs. But Perry Cullman, a product of law-abiding folkways, was aghast.

"Look, boys," he said nervously, "you can't do this. This man is an officer of the law!"

"Ugh!" growled Comanche. "Whar I come from we eats marshals and spits deputy sheriffs!"

"Rest yoreself," Sonora added. "We don't keer if he's General Custer hisself. The Constitooshun says a man's got a right to resist false charges an' false arrest!"

Promptly the two partners fell into argument as to what should be done with Chambers, who now lay flat on the floor, blinking the dizziness out of his head.

"Leave him tied up here an' we'll light out fer the desert," Comanche suggested. "We kin fix the knots so's he'll wriggle loose afore he starves to death, an' meanwhile we'll have a big enough start so's he cain't overhaul us."

"Shore, but we can't start now," Sonora objected. "Not with Barbour out there some'ers in the dark, waitin' to take a shot at anybody that steps out'n the house. We'll have to wait to daylight, at least. 'Sides, this here marshal is a heap of protection fer us. Barbour won't dast come back lookin' for us as long as he's here."

"Ain't it wonderful what a reputation will do?" Comanche sighed. He stared down at the marshal with admiration. "You'd think a man with a reputation like that would have a harder head, wouldn't yuh?"

Chambers glared up at him. "You'll find out how hard I kin be, you old hellion," he said in a voice smothered with rage. "Just wait'll I get loose of these ties!"

"We'll be in Mexico by then," Comanche said loftily. "Livin' on our *hacienda* like a gol-blamed king. An' it won't be offa stolen gold either, yuh blamed bloodhound! We got a mine, an' our gold didn't come out'n no bloomin' express car, dad blast it."

PEARL had a distressed look on her tomboyish face, as she said, "Speaking of mines, I'm beginning to get scared of this whole thing. We've got an outlaw mad at us and now we've got the law down on us. And we haven't done a thing. Maybe we better—"

"Maybe we better not!" Comanche said hurriedly. "We can't help it if these jugheads get queer ideas. This is a legitimate proposition and we ain't done no wrong."

"All right, all right," Sonora said testily. "Let's quit bickering. We gotta wait till daylight and we gotta keep the marshal tied up on account of his hasty temper. While we're waitin', let's study that map a bit, Comanche. You musta had a good hiding place for it the way Barbour couldn't locate it even after shuckin' you plumb down to yore underwear."

"Shore," Comanche said expansively. "I got a—ulp!"

"What're you gobblin' about like a turkey?"

"I—ah—I jest realized," Comanche said lamely, "that I ain't got the slightest idee where that map is my ownself!" His face was a sickly green. "I musta left it on the table back there at the Old Oaken Bucket!"

"Why you feeble-minded, dim-witted, locoed old bullbat!" Sonora roared. "We been chased, held up, got the law down on us—you go an' lose the map!" His skinny hands worked convulsively. "I oughta squeeze that stringy neck of yourn until yore eyes pop out like grapes! I oughta—"

"Hold it, Sonora." Pearl's voice held suppressed laughter. "Don't kill him yet." She inserted a hand deep into the bosom of her shirt. There was a stiff crackle as the map came forth. "I saw Comanche rush out leaving the map on the table, so I thought it would be a good idea if I took it along!"

* * * * *

Two-Spot Barbour was more than a little puzzled by the failure of Deputy Marshal Chambers to emerge from the Double L ranchhouse. To his suspicious mind that could mean only one thing—that the marshal and the two old desert rats had joined forces.

He pulled out then, turning his horse eastward in the darkness. He was certain now that Comanche and Sonora had the map. Not that he needed it to locate his hidden cache, for despite his fears, the years in prison had not dimmed his memory of the desert trails. He could find the cave again without trouble. His attempt to get the map back had been merely to stop anyone else from finding the cave.

But now that events had gotten away from him, there was only one thing to do: Get there first and clean out the cache before Comanche and Sonora could do it. There was only one catch to this. Barbour did not want his two jail-break companions, who had come with him this far, to find out about that hidden gold. The problem, therefore, was to keep them fooled, somehow.

Several miles from the ranch he turned down a dark and steep-walled canyon. Where a mere slit of a side canyon loomed as a darker shadow and a willow tree hung its curtain over the canyon floor, advertising the presence of moisture, Barbour stopped. His lips pursed and he gave the plaintive call of the whippoorwill. There was a response upcanyon and he turned his horse into the side entrance, squeezing through the narrow crevice.

Only a few yards up its curving, twisted floor he saw the glow of a small fire. He dismounted and strode up to the fire. The two men sitting there stared up at him with unwinking eyes. The big outlaw flung himself down on the ground with a grunt.

"What's the deal, Two-Spot?" one of the outlaws demanded. "How long we gonna hole up in this canyon?"

"Keep yore shirt on," the leader growled. "I been scouting the town to see what's what. Don't want to rush into trouble, do you?" He had started talking without the slightest idea of what he was going to tell them, but ideas came to him as he talked. "There's a marshal on our trail—Abe Chambers."

"Chambers!" The other man cursed explosively. "He's wuss'n a bloodhound, that devil! Never gives up."

"I see you know him," Barbour said, grinning sourly. "Then you know that we got to get rid of him before we plan anything else. I happen tuh know where this marshal is going tomorrow morning, fust thing. I reckon if we can get an early start, we can get there before him an' be waitin' when he arrives. We ought to be able to give him a right warm surprise reception.

"There won't be no peace of mind for us until Chambers is dead. He might have a couple of men with him," he added thoughtfully, thinking of Comanche and Sonora. "We'll fix it so's to take care of all of them. Let's get some sleep, *amigos*, cause we got some hard riding pronto in the ayem."

COMANCHE and Sonora did not want Pearl and her shadow, the engineer, tagging them on their desert trek.

"Me 'n Comanche is half Injun anyway," Sonora explained it, "and we kin slither to beat all. But what with loadin' ourselves down with wimmen an' tenderfeet, we'll leave enough tracks fer an army!"

"Besides," Comanche put in hastily, "somebuddy ought to stay here an' keep an eye on the marshal."

"He's old enough to look after himself," Pearl said grimly. "Don't think you two old buzzards are sneaking out without me and Perry."

"Dang it, gal," Comanche protested. "Yuh're plumb liable to rooin th' hull enterprise with that subbornness. What if we run into that *malo hombre*, Two-Spot Barbour?"

"I can shoot as straight as you," Pearl snapped, "and you know it!"

She could also track as well as he, read sign and generally take care of herself in the desert, and Comanche knew it too, so he subsided, grumbling.

The procession set forth with the very first streaks of light in the east, leaving behind them a bound deputy marshal still slightly livid with rage.

"I'll get you two old catamounts if I hafta trail yuh clear to the Argentine!" he vowed.

"We ain't goin' that way," Comanche said helpfully. "So long, Marshal. You oughta be out of them ties afore you get real thirsty. I made the knots purty loose."

What Comanche did not know was that much night work on the knots had loosened them considerably already. An hour later after they had gone, Chambers

got one hand free. Fifteen minutes more saw the ropes off and the marshal stretching his cramped muscles, a free man. He found his gun where Pearl had put it in the table drawer, and out in the corral he found his own horse, with the saddle draped conveniently over the corral fence.

Hardly two hours behind the gold-seekers, the grim and implacable marshal rode forth upon their trail.

Sonora and Comanche were having their own troubles. The map showed Dry River clearly enough and the badlands east of it, with Skull Canyon as their main landmark. There was some complicated ducking in and out of the slashed arroyos and rocky gulches here, with distances marked in leagues, over which they cursed with feeling. Then a landmark, a stunted piñon growing out of the rimrock and leaning down over the canyon.

"And how do we know it's still there?" grumbled Sonora. "After more'n three hunnerd years?"

Perry Cullman snorted. "Three hundred years! You can take my word for it that map isn't ten years old!"

"Then what are you comin' along fer, yuh danged dude?" Comanche snarled at him.

"Quit fighting, boys," Pearl ordered.

"Yeah, quit fighting," Sonora seconded it, folding the map so he could get his nose closer to it. "Yuh take a sight from the pinon through two rock chimneys into a saddle, an' go straight southeast to a spring at th' base of the canyon wall. Thutty paces north o' the spring is some natural rock steps. Yuh go up them to a screen of bushes, shove 'em aside an' you're on a ledge that takes you right to the cave."

"Easy as strollin' down the street." Comanche boasted.

"There's chests of gold and jools, diamond tiaras an'—"

"What's a tiara?"

"It's a kind of snake, like a sidewinder, yuh ignerammus."

"A diamond snake? You mean like a diamond back rattler? What the heck are we gonna do with a diamond back rattler? You kin have it fer yore share, Sonora."

"For Pete's sake," the girl said, "let's not start arguing over dividing something we haven't got!"

CHAPTER IV

Treasure Cave

SPREAD out in a straggling group, they slogged on. The dust rose in puffs from their horses' hoofs and hung in the air without breeze to blow it away. The sun wheeled slowly above them in the brassy Arizona sky.

"Not to seem alarmin' or nothing," Sonora muttered to Comanche, "but did yuh happen to notice that leetle dust cloud in the rear?"

"I did," Comanche said.

"Chambers?"

"I reckon."

"Thought you pulled them knots tight?"

"Didn't want tuh strangle the man, did I?" Comanche said uneasily.

Sonora grunted. His eyes ranged the horizon. A semi-circle of rugged, barren ridges rimmed the east and Sonora's eyes clung to the high rim which, seeming close in that desert air, was still miles away. Comanche's eyes followed his gaze. A little wink of light sparkled there and was gone—just such a wink as might come if the sun struck a metal adornment on a man's chaps, or a bright buckle on his saddle.

"More comp'ny," Comanche said tightly. "Who do yuh think that might be? Barbour?"

"Don't reckon it's Sandy Claus an' his reindeer."

"Looks like we're plumb surrounded. Now what?"

"We'll Injun 'em. We camp at Dry River tonight. Tomorrow when we start, we split up Injun fashion. Give 'em four—no, three; can't trust that Cullman by hisself on the desert—three sets of tracks to follow instid of one. That oughta give 'em a little trouble unravelin' things."

"Wonder how Barbour knowed about this here map?"

"He knowed the feller that sold it to yuh," Sonora said.

"Must be the real stuff if he killed McNary for it."

"If it ain't, I'm shore gonna take it outa yore hide!"

Near sunset, they rode down to the parched shores of Dry River. They spread

their gathering in the warm sand at the river's edge. It was a dry camp and a cold one, with no fire.

In the morning they made breakfast on some corn bread, cold meat cakes and a swallow of tepid water from their canteens. Then Sonora explained the plan to split their forces.

"We'll go three ways from here, circle around an' meet at Skull Canyon. Pearl, you sure you kin find it?"

She gave him a glance of contempt.

"All right," Sonora said hastily. "Perry, you stick with her. Let's go."

It was late afternoon and the sun was burning down the western horizon when Comanche pulled in to Skull Canyon. He stood in his stirrups and looked all around, blinking his eyes as though to clear them of the gritty alkali dust which covered his face and powdered him thickly.

Sonora stepped from behind a rock. "Git down, ye old catawampus!" he croaked indignantly. "What are you posin' for—Hiawatha lookin' for the last buffalo?"

"Nigh killed your horse gettin' here ahead of me, didn't yuh?" Comanche sputtered, sliding out of the saddle.

"Quit braggin'. Here comes Pearl and the tenderfoot."

They clattered up together, and it was a tribute to the girl's good looks that she could still look pretty despite the punishing heat and the thick layer of gray dust which clung to a perspiring skin and turned into a fair sort of clay pack. Perry Cullman, a big man, suffered most from the heat. His shirt was a mess and his cheerful disposition had taken a terrible beating.

"How much further is this imaginary cave?" he demanded. "I'm warning you that I can't hold out much longer."

"Jest a ways, now," Comanche evaded. "Light down an' we'll rest fer an hour."

An hour's rest in the shade, a few swallows of water—then they cinched up again and climbed aboard their hulls for the last leg of the jaunt.

The sun slid under the edge of the world as they were threading the intricate mazes of Skull Canyon and its tributaries. The shadows grew swiftly in this shut-in world and became tinted with the blue of dusk. Sonora stopped, peering ahead and upward.

"What's he looking for?" Cullman demanded peevishly.

"I'm lookin' for that piñon you said wouldn't last three hunnered years!" Sonora snapped. "What's that?"

A gnarled and wind twisted piñion clung to the face of the cliff over head. Sonora leveled a long, straight arm. Southeast, the piñon was framed between two rugged rock chimneys which loomed like the battlements of an ancient castle against the lighter sky.

"Jest like the map said," Comanche whispered, awed.

The dusk grew thicker about them and the landmarks began to blend and disappear into the curtain of night. And then clear and sweet, the odor of green things growing came to them, and with it the tinkle and splash of running water.

THE four treasure hunters made their way upcanyon quietly. The extravagant hush of the canyon laid a disquieting hand upon their spirits. "What a spooky place," Pearl whispered.

"The gooseflesh is playin' tag up an' down my spine," Comanche gulped.

"Lissen," Sonora said, "let's git organized. Pearl, you an' the tenderfoot stay here, whilst me an' Comanche go ahead an' scout the lay of the land. Then we'll come back for you if everything is jake."

"All right," breathed Pearl. Then, "What are we whispering about? There probably isn't a soul around for a hundred miles."

"Less'n you count ghosts as souls," Comanche said. "Ain't this the lost mine of Don Cabeza de Vaca? And ain't his soul supposed to hang around the place?"

"Oh, stop it," Cullman snapped peevishly. "There aren't any ghosts and there probably isn't any mine either."

"Lissen to ignerance talkin'," Comanche sniffed. "Come on, Sonora, let the septiks wait."

They left the horses with the others and slipped forward on foot. Some compulsion made them slink forward as though fierce, unknown dangers awaited them in the dark.

"This's creepier 'n a haunted house, Sonora," Comanche breathed. "My hair is standin' up so straight that my hat's two feet up in the air. Can't we wait 'till mornin'?"

"You lummox, with Chambers mebbe clost behind us an' Barbour the dickens knows where? We got to get in there pronto an' see what's what an' get out!"

"All right," Comanche sighed, "but I shore wish I'd been a better boy an' said my prayers regular. This is makin' an old man of me."

Following his sharp old nose, Sonora led to the spring and groped along the wall until he found rough stone steps. Then he started up.

"Hey, wait fer me!" Comanche gasped in panic as he saw his partner suddenly appear to rise into the air. "It's darker'n a stack of black cats!"

"Come on yuh danged idjit, and don't make so much noise!"

Bats flew squeaking about them, and a desert owl quavered its lonely cry in the distance. Then a coyote loosed his unholy racket of yelps and barks and the gooseflesh left not a spot of smooth skin on Comanche's hide. As they parted the bushes on the ledge, the moon shoved its bright rim over the canyon wall and a silvery glow bathed the gorge.

Looking up from below, Two-Spot Barbour thought he saw the bushes move, but no sign of life appeared on the wall.

Rounding the shoulder, Sonora stopped so suddenly that Comanche bumped into him.

"What's the matter?" Comanche queried.

"There she is. The cave!"

"Golly!" Comanche regarded the dark interior with misgivings. "Well, go ahead. You kin have the honor of enterin' first."

"I'm a-goin' to, yuh lily-livered polecat!" Boldly, Sonora stepped toward the entrance.

He struck a match and looked around. "Heckuva mine if yuh ask me," he said. "Looks like a plain old cave. An' somebody's been usin' it, too. See that gatherin' over there?"

Comanche crossed the rock-walled room and by the light of another sputtering match examined the gear.

"Hey," he said cautiously. "There's some kind o' sign scratched here on the wall. Hold the fort, Sonora, whilst I take a look."

He drew a bowie knife from his boot and began to dig at the base of the wall. The knife grated on small stones, but the soil was sandy and yielded readily. Down six inches the point of the blade caught in something. Comanche scraped away the loose dirt and hauled forth a bulging parcel. It was a cowboy's yellow slicker, tied up in a tight roll. He cut the string and exposed two well-stuffed leather pouches.

"Found any Spanish doubloons?" Sonora demanded impatiently.

Comanche scratched his head. "These here Spaniards were plumb up to date," he muttered. "Danged if they didn't mine good old U. S. foldin' money!"

"Huh? Yuh're batty! Let's see that."

Sonora crossed over, and by matchlight they stared, bewildered, at the tightly wrapped stacks of gold-backed American bills.

"That old Cabeza was one smart ghost," Comanche said. "Went an' converted all his assets into bills. Danged if that ain't a break fer us. This stuff is lighter to pack out than pieces-of-eight an' jools!"

"Stow it," Sonora snapped. "Can't yuh see there's somethin' wrong about this?"

"It's mighty dark," Comanche muttered, "but I'm beginnin' to see."

Sonora went back to the entrance. "We gotta get outa here," he muttered.

THEY started carefully out on the ledge again. Suddenly guns roared down in the canyon. Instinctively they ducked, belatedly realized that the shooting was not directed at them. Clear and shrill, Pearl's voice floated up the gorge.

"Hold it, Sonora! We're coming!"

"The idjits!" Sonora groaned. "Runnin' smack into trouble!"

He slid down the last few steps on the seat of his pants and landed with both feet in the spring. Comanche, sliding after him, heard him grunt and saw a dark shape rise up into the moonlight, with gleaming pistol barrel.

"Stand still!" snapped a well-remembered voice. "This is the Law!"

Sonora stood still. But Abe Chambers never had a chance to tell what he was doing next. For Comanche arrived like a toboggan, with both feet landing in the marshal's face.

Chambers saw all the stars and planets in the solar system and a few that didn't belong. When the fireworks stopped, he found himself being dragged into the brush by the two partners, while Coman-

che hissed urgently into his ear.

"Quit wrigglin' like that, yuh varmint! Don't yuh know that them outlaws are round here somewheres?"

A shot crashed out in the trees. "That's Pearl," Comanche said. "She's stalkin' them."

"We better stalk 'em from the rear," Sonora answered.

"Hey!" said Chambers. "Give me back my gun, if you expect me to do any helpin' in this war."

"We hadda find out if you was friend or foe," Comanche said, giving the marshal back his weapon.

"For Pete's sake, let's not shoot each other! Can you whistle like a whippoorwill?" Chambers asked.

"Shore."

"All right, let that be your signal."

They crawled away in the dark. Comanche slid rapidly through the brush in the direction of the last shot. A crackling sounded up ahead. And in the filtering moonlight he saw a dark shape. He lined up his gun, then misgivings smote him. Friend or foe? He whistled like a whippoorwill.

"Who is it?" said a harsh voice.

"It's me," Comanche said, and squeezed the trigger.

There was a yelp of alarm and a man went floundering off through the brush. From the noise and speed of his departure, Comanche was sure he had missed.

"Got to git new glasses," he muttered in disgust.

A new thrashing to his right galvanized him and he stalked that, noiseless as an Indian. A dark shadow crouched behind a log and Comanche could dimly see the slight reflections from a rifle barrel. He leaped, landed on the figure's back, Colt raised for a chopping blow downward. The softness of the figure warned him in time. "Pearl!" he gasped, rolling off. "I danged near scalped yuh, honey!"

"Sh-sh," Pearl warned. "I saw that big lunk Barbour and I think he's headed this way."

"Let's get outa here," Sonora urged. "This dampness gives me the rheumatiz. Where's the tenderfoot?"

"He's stalkin' Barbour from the other side."

"This is worse mixed up than a can of earthworms," Comanche groaned. "That marshal is out there too, honey, and we're liable to shoot each other in this business."

"I'm not leavin' till I shoot somebody," Pearl said grimly. "And I hope it's Barbour!"

CHAPTER V

Whippoorwill Call

COMANCHE'S voice took on a pleading tone as he peered through darkness at Pearl.

"Lissen!" Comanche said. "We got the mazuma. Now we—"

"The mine? You've got the gold—and the diamond tiaras?"

"No. It was in U. S. bills. But we gotta—"

"Bills? What would the Spaniards—"

"Can't explain now. We gotta get out to the horses an' call the others in. We got an identify signal—the whippoorwill call. Come on, honey!"

He pulled her up and started her down canyon. Meanwhile, the mad stalking in this moonlit labyrinth went on. A flurry of shots bloomed in the brush.

Comanche urged her on. Out in the open, he stopped to send back the whippoorwill call and then they ran for the horses. Once there, Comanche tied the pouches on behind his saddle and tightened all the cinches, ready to leave.

"Here comes somebody," he announced. "It's Sonora. I'd know that hound dog lope o' his anywhere."

"Got th' gal—good!" Sonora panted. "Where's th' tenderfoot?"

"He's out there and he doesn't know about the whippoorwill signal," Pearl said. "If he doesn't show up, I'm going back for him."

"Wait—somebuddy's comin'. It's Chambers."

"And more visitors are comin' right behind us!" the marshal gasped.

Instinctively, Comanche and Sonora spread out. With the marshal, they stood spraddle-legged, waiting. Out of the moonlight loomed the bearlike figure of Two-Spot Barbour. Flanking him were the two outlaws who had broken jail with him.

"Lookit all the whippoorwills," Sonora said.

"That was our signal, too," Barbour said, grinning wolfishly.

"You're under arrest, Two-Spot," Chambers snapped. "For jail-breakin' and the murder of two prison guards!"

Barbour chuckled. "It'll be three in a minute," he rumbled, "countin' you an another. I dunno what to count these two ol' prairie dogs as."

"The man's insultin'," Comanche said. "Ain't been brought up right."

"Prob'bly never had th' tender guidance of a mother," Sonora said.

"Shore. His mother was a wolf."

"Like them Romulus an' Remus fellers I read about?"

"They was gents. This Two-Spot is only a deuce—wild."

"That's enough!" Barbour snarled. "I was up in the cave. Hand it over!"

"Hand what over?" Comanche asked.

Chambers knitted bushy brows at them. "You found money?" he asked.

"Spanish treasure," Comanche said stoutly. He pointed at Barbour. "I don't like his attitude. I think he's a crook."

"I've got my own idees about that 'Spanish treasure,' " Chambers said tightly. "An' I don't want anyone to forget I'm the Law. Let's see it, Comanche."

"Never mind!" Barbour snapped. "I'll take it!" His red-rimmed eyes lifted, saw the leather pouches tied behind Comanche's saddle. Satisfaction bloated his brutal features. Having located the money, he was ready to move. His body tensed, seemed to coil for action.

"Oh-oh," Comanche warned, "he's gittin' too big fer his britches!"

BARBOUR'S hand shot downward. He tugged at his gun, lifted it high and was leveling off when Comanche's first shot slapped into him and spun him halfway around. His gun blasted a yard-long streak of flame that screeched harmlessly over Comanche's head.

But the vitality of the man was enormous. He swung himself back, clenching his teeth against the shock of the big .44 slug, and slammed out another shot that nicked the lobe of Comanche's ear and drew an Apache shriek from that old tough-as-leather warrior.

"Want to play rough, do yuh?" Comanche yelled. His old gun bucked twice more, and Barbour, shot to ribbons, flung up his arms and crashed to the sand.

The other two outlaws had clawed for their irons at the same time and matched their speed against that of Sonora and the marshal. One got off his shot at the same time as Sonora, and the old desert rat's hat took wings. But his return shot was straighter and the outlaw crumpled and went down. Half a second later, his companion folded on top of him.

The canyon still rang with the reports as the victors blew smoke from their guns and looked for more opponents. Feet thumped hastily through the sand and guns came up. "Don't shoot!" Pearl cried. "It's Perry Cullman!"

The engineer dashed up, breathless. "What's happened?"

"We jest renewed our acquaintance with Barbour and company," Comanche said. "It was a case of hello and goodby."

* * * * *

They made their way out of the canyon with dawn. Chambers, having settled the affair of Two-Spot Barbour, was inclined to forget grudges against Sonora and Comanche. There was only one thing—

"I'll take that money you dug up in th' cave," he said firmly.

"Money!" Comanche yelped, outraged. "That's our Spanish treasure! Don Cabeza de Vaca—"

"Head of a cow yourself," Chambers said firmly. "That's the loot from the Union Pacific holdup that Barbour's had cached out all these years. Give!"

Glumly, Comanche handed over the leather pouches. Visions of riches, of vast haciendas, took wings and disappeared.

"It's a crool world," he sighed.

"Cheer up," said Chambers. "There's a reward for this mazuma offered by the railroad. You boys ought to be getting back about five thousand of this."

"Five thou— Sonora, you hear that? We're rich after all! Shucks, we'll turn that old Double L inter the garden spot of Arizona, that's what we'll do! Pearl, honey, we're rich!"

He turned to the girl to find her slightly oblivious, nestled in Perry Cullman's arms, riding double with him on his horse.

"I kin take a hint," Comanche said with dignity. "Come on, Sonora. Our presence is sooperflewous, as the feller says in the book."

Rustlers Can Be Too Smart

By
DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Gardner moaned and slumped against Belmont

AS he stood beside Seth Gardner at the bar of the Longhorn Saloon, it seemed to Tom Belmont that the old cattleman had been talking for hours. That was the trouble with Gardner. The boss of the Bar G was a right good man to work for, but he sure didn't know when to keep his mouth shut, in the estimation of his foreman.

"Like I been sayin'," went on Gardner, "we handled rustlers a heap better when I settled in this part of the country thirty years ago. I was just a young feller like Tom Belmont here then—but plenty salty." The ranch owner grinned, and tugged at his mustache. "Not that I'm so old now. My hair is still dark and I'm feelin' right healthy."

"Shore you are, boss," said Belmont quickly, trying to get Gardner away from the subject of rustling. "Hope I'm feelin' as spry when I'm yore age."

It was early in the evening, and there were only a few men in the Longhorn, but the tension that had hung over all of the Sweetwater rangeland was heavy in the air. Such talking as Seth Gardner was doing was dangerous here and now.

For the past six months all of the ranchers in the region had been losing stock, and yet no one knew the identity of the rustlers. There were no strangers around who might be suspected of stealing the cattle. It had reached the point where the local men were growing suspicious of each other—no longer certain who was friend or foe.

"Yes, sir," said Gardner. "In the old days if a man suspected his neighbor of rustlin' he did something about it, pronto."

Further along the bar Bill Jackson, a big sullen-faced man who owned the Circle J spread over south of the Bar G, put down his drink, and slowly turned to stare at Gardner. Jud Ashland, owner of the Triangle north of Gardner's ranch put down his cards and got to his feet. He had been playing poker at a corner table.

"We didn't wait for the law to keep foolin' around, like the sheriff is doin' here," went on Gardner. "When we suspected a man of rustlin' we told him so,

Cowboy Tom Belmont Fights Out of a Tight Spot!

and were ready to back it up with gunsmoke."

Belmont watched and waited tensely as he listened. The words of the old cattleman might prove the spark that would start guns roaring. When you had been a foreman of a spread for four years you fought for your own outfit.

"Mebbe we'd all feel a heap easy if yuh said who yuh're suspectin', Gardner," Ashland said as he stepped forward. "So say it!"

"I'd kind of like to hear that, too," said Bill Jackson. "Speak up, Seth."

SETH GARDNER suddenly realized he had talked himself into trouble, but he was too stubborn to back down now. He glared at Ashland and then at Jackson. Beside him Belmont waited, and the foreman's right hand was close to his gun.

"I know who is doin' the rustlin'," Gardner said. "But I ain't fool enough to accuse him of it here and now."

"If yuh ask, me I think yuh're not only a liar, but a big bag of wind," Ashland said. He was, a dark haired man with a thin black mustache.

Without another word, he turned his back on Gardner and Belmont and walked out of the saloon. The owner of the Bar G said nothing. Jackson just shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the bar and picked up his drink.

"He called me a liar and a bag of wind," said Gardner so slow that only Belmont heard him. "And I didn't even try to gun him down. I reckon I must really be gettin' old." He looked at his foreman. "You better take me home, Tom. It ain't safe for an old man like me to be out alone at night. 'Sides I don't know who the rustlers are. I was just talkin' "

In silence they paid for their drinks and left the saloon. Outside the night was dark, and the single street of the little cowtown seemed lonely in the shadows. From the blackness that was the mouth of an alley between the feed store and the harness shop, a figure moved and a gun roared.

Belmont's hand flashed to his Colt, the gun was in his grasp when Gardner uttered a little moan and slumped against him. Belmont caught the rancher with his free hand, and held him up.

"Jud Ashland!" Belmont exclaimed as the man across the street stepped forward "The sidewinder!"

He fired just as Ashland shot again. Both bullets went wild and then the owner of the Triangle ducked back in the shadows of the alley and disappeared. From inside the saloon came the sound of excited voices that grew louder as the men in the place came to the door, pushing through the batwings to learn the reason for the shooting.

Belmont gently lowered the old rancher to the plank walk. There was no doubt in his mind that Gardner was badly wounded.

"What happened?" Bill Jackson asked.

Before Belmont could answer a big man pushed his way through the swiftly gathering crowd. It was Sheriff Martin Lake, and behind him came Jud Ashland.

"Like I told you, Sheriff," Ashland said. "It was Tom Belmont who shot Gardner. I saw the whole thing from across the street, and ran to get you as quick as I could."

Belmont stood up and gazed at Ashland in open mouthed amazement. The nerve of the man left Belmont speechless. He had shot Gardner from across the street, tried to get the Bar G foreman with a second shot, and now he was claiming Belmont had shot his boss.

The town doctor had appeared and was examining Gardner. "This man is badly wounded," he said. "Some of you men carry him down the street to my office. He's unconscious—but be careful."

Four men picked up the wounded man and carried him to the doctor's office. Sheriff Lake glared at Belmont.

"Why did yuh shoot him, Belmont?" the sheriff demanded.

"It wasn't me that shot him," said Belmont. "It was Ashland who did it from across the street."

"He's lyin', Sheriff," said Ashland. "I didn't have any reason for shootin' Gardner. A little while ago we were all in the saloon. Gardner was doin' a lot of talkin' about the rustlers—claimed he knew who they were."

"That's right," said Jackson, who was listening close by. "And it sounded like Gardner was accusin' me and Jud, so we asked him to name names."

"The old man backed down then," said Ashland quickly. "Said he knew who was doin' the rustlin', but he wasn't goin' to

say who it was there in the Longhorn. I noticed that Belmont was kind of nervous like he was expectin' trouble, and he kept his hand close to his gun."

"Then what happened?" asked Lake. "Tell me that part of it again, Jud."

"I left the saloon," said Ashland. "I was standin' across the street when Gardner and Belmont came out. Looked like they were arguin' about somethin', though I was too far away to hear what they were sayin'. All of a sudden Belmont moves away from the old man and draws his gun. He shoots Gardner, and then as the old man falls, Belmont grabs him. I was plumb mad when I seen what Belmont had done so I fired a couple of shots at him. Couldn't hit him because he was using Gardner as a shield, so I ran to get you, Sheriff."

"Ashland is lyin'," Belmont protested, but he could tell from the expressions on the faces of the men around him that no one believed him. "He's the one who shot Gardner."

There was an angry murmur from the other men, and Belmont felt like a sheep, surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves. He could almost feel the way their minds were working. Suppose Seth Gardner actually had accused him of being the head of the rustler gang, and Belmont had shot the old man before the boss of the Bar G could talk. In that case Tom Belmont deserved lynching.

"I'm placing you under arrest, Tom," Sheriff Lake said quietly. "The law listens to both sides of a thing like this, so I ain't shore whether you or Ashland is lyin'." The lawman placed his hand on Belmont's right arm. "Give me yore gun and come along with me."

BELMONT drew his gun and handed it to the sheriff, butt first. Martin Lake thrust it into his belt. The crowd parted to let them through as the sheriff and his prisoner walked toward the sheriff's office. Belmont felt that hate was a living thing in the men he passed.

The office was across the street halfway down the block from the Longhorn Saloon. No one followed the sheriff and his prisoner. Belmont glanced back and saw Ashland, Jackson and the other men going back into the saloon.

There was a chair outside the open door of the office. Lake glanced at Belmont as they reached the door.

"I was sitting in that chair when the shootin' started," the sheriff said dryly. "And my eyesight is still right good."

"Then you know it was Ashland who did the shootin'?" asked Belmont eagerly.

"I know that somebody fired at you and Gardner from the alley across from the saloon," Lake said. "I couldn't prove that it was Jud Ashland." The sheriff grinned at his prisoner as they stepped into the office. "But mebbe you could, Tom."

The sheriff took the prisoner's gun out of his belt and stuck it back into Belmont's holster. "I shore never thought that you would turn on me and lock me in one of my own cells," Lake said. "And yore escaping the way yuh did makes yuh look plumb guilty."

"Huh?" said Belmont blankly, and then he nodded. "Oh, I get it. And if you were an escapin' prisoner who aimed to clear hisself of the crime where would you go, Sheriff?"

"The Triangle spread might prove right interesting," the sheriff said. "Leastwise that's my hunch."

Ten minutes later Lake had all the appearance of being bound and gagged and lying on the floor inside of one of the locked cells of the jail in the rear of the office. The prisoner had escaped after a desperate struggle in which Lake had calmly supplied the rope and gag.

Twenty minutes later, Tom Belmont had managed to sneak his horse away from the hitching rail at the side of the Longhorn saloon and had ridden out of town without being seen. He headed north in the direction of Jud Ashland's Triangle ranch.

Five miles from the town and about three miles from the Triangle was a stretch of wild, hilly country. Here Belmont rode his horse in behind some rocks out of sight as he heard the sound of approaching horses. He waited and five riders driving a small herd of cattle appeared. All of the riders had the lower part of their faces masked by their neckerchiefs.

"The rustlers!" muttered Belmont as he watched and listened.

The moon had come out from behind the clouds and the night was a thing of silver lights. One of the men with the herd rode close to the rocks and the Triangle brand on his horse was clearly visible.

Belmont understood how the cattle steal-

ing was done now. It was the men of Ashland's outfit who did the rustling while their boss hung around town so that he would not be suspected.

They went on, to disappear behind some trees. Belmont waited and then rode out from the rocks intending to follow them.

From behind a big rock a shadowy figure hurled itself at him. Strong fingers caught him and dragged him from saddle. He caught a fleeting glimpse of his attacker and saw it was Bill Jackson.

"Saw yuh when yuh sneaked out of town," Jackson panted. "Figgered yuh would go to join yore gang so I trailed yuh. Why didn't yuh stay with yore men instead of lettin' them go on ahead with that stolen herd of my stock? I've been saving this for the boss of the rustlers!"

As Belmont struggled to get to his feet, Jackson hit him and knocked him flat. Then they were on the ground writhing around and pounding blows at each other. Belmont grabbed at Jackson's shirtsleeve as the owner of the Circle J tried to get to his feet. The cloth ripped and Belmont found himself holding an empty sleeve.

"I've got yuh now, rustler," Jackson snapped. He reached for his gun.

From back among the rocks a gun roared. Jackson pitched forward on his face as a bullet got him in the back. Belmont leaped up, trying to drag his own Colt out of holster. From behind the rocks came the clatter of a horse's hoofs, then the thud of them on soft ground, the sound fading away into the distance.

"So now I'm supposed to be blamed for downing Jackson," said Belmont. "Ain't a doubt in my mind it was Ashland who did that drygulchin'. He figgers I'm more useful to him alive than dead."

He knelt down and examined the man sprawled face downward on the ground, and then he chuckled softly . . .

THE early morning sunlight gleamed down on Tom Belmont as he staggered along with the limp figure of Bill Jackson hanging across his left shoulder. He was not far from the boulders where he had seen the rustlers the previous night.

He halted and waited as a horseman appeared and rode closer. It was Jud Ashland. The Triangle owner's smile was evil as he reined his horse to a halt.

"So you killed Jackson, too," he said. "Lookin' for a place to hide the body?"

"What's the use of bluffin' with just the two of us here?" Belmont demanded, his tone bitter. "You know that you are the boss of the rustlers and that they are yore Triangle crew. You shore framed me with that stuff about me killin' Gardner.

"I was smart all right," said Ashland. "I don't mind admittin' to you that the rustlers are my men, since you know it anyway. And now I'm going to take you into town and turn you over to the sheriff. With the body of Jackson as more evidence against you I reckon you'll hang."

Ashland reached for his gun, but in spite of the weight of the man he carried, Belmont was fast and his right hand was free. His bullet got Ashland in the shoulder before the other man had finished his draw.

"All right, Tom," said the supposedly dead man. "You can put me down now."

As Belmont released his hold Jackson slid down off his shoulder and landed on his feet. Ashland's drygulch bullet had entered the fleshy part of his shoulder and Jackson had dropped to the ground in order to make the rustler boss think he had been killed.

"He's getting away," shouted Jackson. Ashland had dropped his gun, but he wheeled his horse and started to ride away.

"Stay where yuh are, Ashland or I'll shore down yuh," shouted Belmont, his gun still covering the owner of the Triangle. He sent a bullet whistling by Ashland's head to prove he meant it. Ashland lost all interest in trying to get away.

"This shore worked out just like yuh planned it last night, Tom," Jackson said. "I heard Ashland admit his men were doin' the rustlin'. Guess we had better take the prisoner to town and turn him over to the sheriff. Wait until I get my hoss."

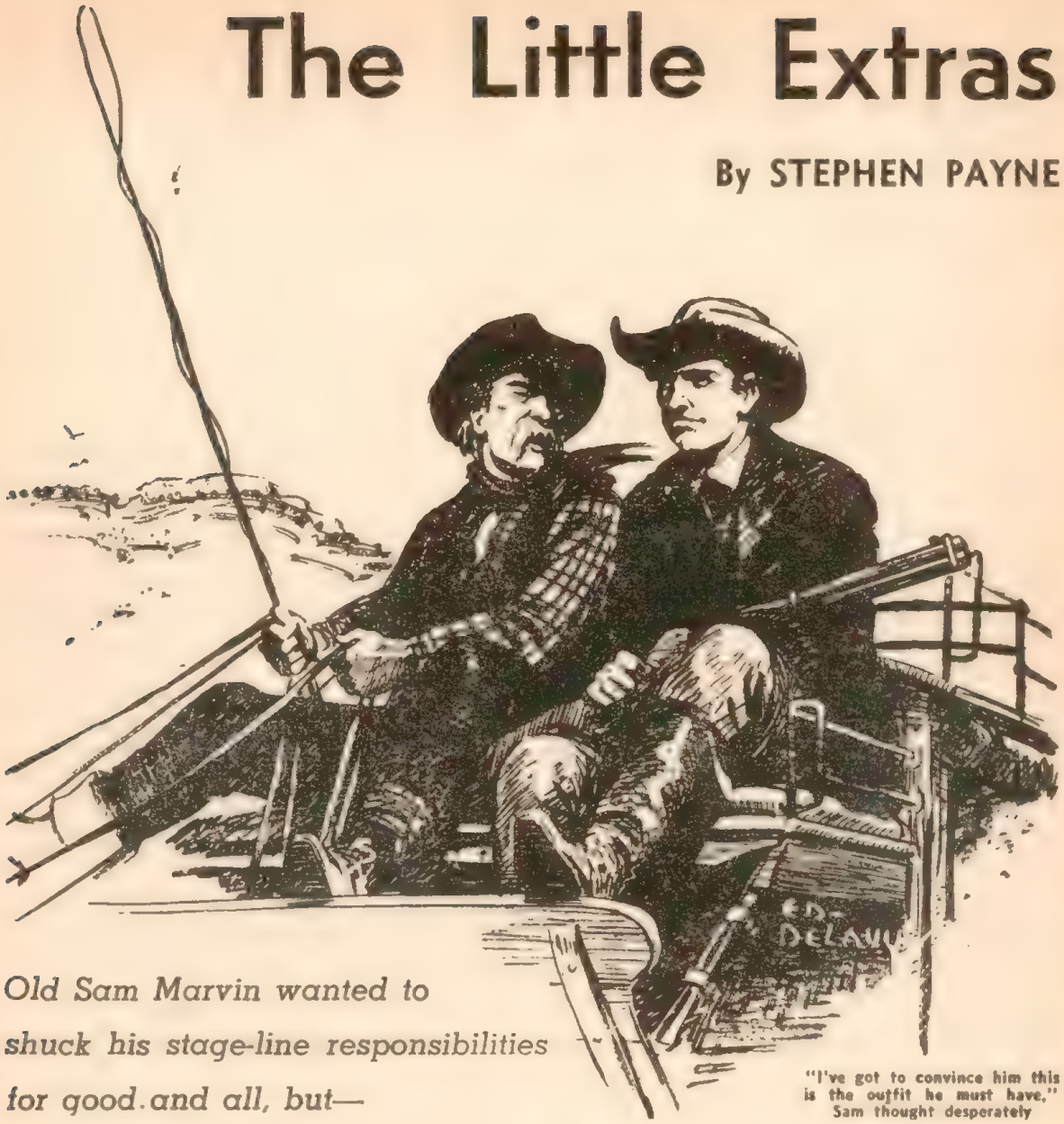
An hour later Belmont was back in town. Ashland was in jail, and a posse had headed for the Triangle to round up his men. Seth Gardner would recover, and it looked like the rustling in that section of the country was all over.

"Ashland might have kept right on gettin' away with it, if he hadn't become nervous and decided to down the Old Man," Belmont said, as he was having a drink with Jackson and the sheriff. He grinned. "Sometimes rustlers can be too smart!"

The sheriff and Jackson just nodded in agreement as they sipped their drinks.

The Little Extras

By STEPHEN PAYNE



"I've got to convince him this is the outfit he must have," Sam thought desperately

Old Sam Marvin wanted to shuck his stage-line responsibilities for good and all, but—

LEAVING Red Fern at dawn, with his spring wagon stage, old Sam Marvin took the south road along a sagebrush ridge. The wide, green valley of Willow Creek lay under the bluff at his right, and across interminable reaches of sage flats and rolling hills spotted with aspen groves, upflung mountains lifted massive shoulders against the morning sunlight.

Early-rising mosquitoes and gnats began to annoy both the stolid bay team and the young man who occupied the front seat with the stage driver.

"You have to put up with this every trip?" the man asked with sharp irritation.

The pleasant excitement which had been running through Sam since yesterday forenoon, when he had met this newcomer and had learned he was interested in purchasing a stage outfit, was still with the old-timer. Today, to put the prospective buyer "onto the ropes," he was taking him over the route.

This evening, if all went well, Sam

might shuck off the hardships and responsibilities of his job, free at last to do whatever he dad-johned pleased. It was spine-tingling, thrilling.

With an effort Sam brought his mind back to the immediate present, and said in his easy drawl, "I don't pay them pestiferous insects no attention."

His dark eyes, still bright and keen with interest in life after sixty-five years, ran over his companion, and he tried to make himself believe he liked what he saw.

With his stocky build and heavy features Kirk Hibbens reminded Sam of a husky draft horse, but there the resemblance ended. The man's mouth was selfish and his pale blue eyes sullen. And thus far in the negotiations, Hibbens had been so dad-blamed non-committal and seemingly disinterested that Sam reckoned he had his work cut out for him if he hoped to make a sale.

"Buyers are so hard to come by, I've got to convince him this is the outfit he must have," Sam thought desperately. "So I won't mention thirty-and-forty-below-zero days, or the howlin' blizzards I fight every winter; nor yet how my left foot still aches like the dickens from bein' frozen last winter. I'll mention only the nice things!"

Kirk Hibbens was s a y i n g now, "Humph! you're so sunbaked and tough they can't bite you. The bugs'd get more nourishment out of a chunk of weathered rawhide."

"Mebbe so," said Sam, grinning cheerfully. "You know, Kirk, this time of year there are lots of pleasant things to see and hear and think about — meadowlarks singin', mother sage hens tooling their broods through the brush, cattle and horses nigh the watering places in every little draw. I often sight antelope in the distance, and winter or summer, there's always those grand old mountains. Sa-ay, they make a feller feel—"

"Plain monotonous, if yuh ask me," Hibbens cut in. "Instead of rambling with six live horses, you poke along, poke along with this dinky two-horse outfit!"

Sam smoothed his gray, horse-tail mustache with his knotty right hand, and his dark eyes grew brighter with a momentary flash. B'gollies, if he was a mind to, he could tell Hibbens that he, Sam Marvin, had handled the ribbons over one of those colorful six-horse, rambling stage outfits until the railroad had thrown him out of a job.

BEFORE that? Well, he had knocked around over this great West, hunting, prospecting, p u n c h i n g cows, freighting. Once on a time he'd even been a rancher. A hard winter had wiped him out and eventually he had meandered to this mountain-ringed basin high in the Rockies.

For the past eight years he had been driving this same stage. Three times each week he loaded up in Red Fern, followed the ridge above Willow Creek for eighteen-odd miles, swung to the right past Sage Creek post office, where he ate dinner and changed horses, and then circled back to Red Fern by way of the bluff above Blue Fork River.

Although rural delivery had come four years ago, Sam had not yet realized what an integral part his rickety stage and its driver had become in the lives of the people he served. Today he was feeling sorry for himself. Monotonous? Yep, it was! No wonder he was fed up.

The team pulled off the road at the Titus mail box and stopped. Fumbling behind the seat for the right mail sack and for one particular little package, Sam's numb hands and aching arms reminded him how "stove-up-like" he was getting.

By the time he found what he wanted, a middle-aged woman had climbed the bluff from the creek valley and was at the mail box.

"Morning, Sam!" A joyful note lifted her voice.

Sam tipped his dust-colored slouch hat. "Same to you, Mrs. Titus. You're sure looking well, 'spite of all the hard work yuh turn off. Me and Sheridan had quite a time matchin' this thread and yarn. But I reckon we done 'er. It's four bits even."

"Goodness! I didn't bring any money with me, Sam. But our spotted heifer's come fresh, and in a week we'll have butter for you to take to town."

"Shu, forget the four bits. I betcha

that spotted heifer's a good milker and you'll be settin' pretty, right soon. Letter from Joe today?"

Kirk Hibbens shifted his big frame restively. "Let's get along, Sam."

Mrs. Titus had opened the package. "The yarn's a perfect match, Sam! And here's a letter from Joe! I declare, I don't see why that boy has to go away adventuring when we so want him at home."

"Natural, I reckon, Mrs. Titus. Don't you fret about Joe. He's a plumb sound boy. Uh — I was forgettin'. Mrs. Titus, this is Kirk Hibbens. He's going to buy my outfit."

Mrs. Titus showed an oddly startled expression. "My goodness, Sam, you can't mean that! What will we ever do without you?"

"Why, it don't make no dif who drives the stage. You see, Mrs. Titus, my daughter's sent for me to come live with her and her man. She says I'm gettin' too old to — "

"Too old? Fiddlesticks! Why Sam, you'll never—"

But Sam didn't hear the rest. Hibbens had grabbed the lines and had used the whip on the team.

Sam waved his hat to Mrs. Titus and then faced ahead. "Why'd you do that, Kirk?" he asked with an edge to his voice.

"Good gosh! Gab, gab, gab, with a silly old woman. What was all that about thread and yarn?"

"Just one of the little extras as goes with the job. That's one reason I'm showin' yuh the ropes, Kirk. So you'll meet the folks — mostly they're swell — and get onto — '

"Get onto their imposin' on a fellow?"

"Imposin'? I hadn't never figgered it that way. Here, gimme them lines."

Sam possessed himself of the lines and drew the team down to their customary dog-trot. The stage rocked along, with occasional stops at mail boxes in which Sam found sacks to take to Red Fern, and replaced them with others containing mail from the post office.

As they neared the fifth box, three cowpunchers, riding across the sage, veered their mounts and came in on a dead run just as Sam's team stopped.

"Hi, Sam!" The three said it in one breath. "Got that mail order package for us?"

Sam grinned at them. Two were smooth-cheeked kids of seventeen and nineteen; the third was an old hand like himself.

"You betcha!" he said happily. "Seems 'twan't no time since I sent off that mail order for you jiggers. Catch!"

In a matter of second the three were off their horses and ripping the paper from the bulky package.

"Here's the Bell Seven mail, Ike," said Sam, tossing the sack to the old hand. But it was nineteen-year-old Tom who caught it and immediately lost interest in the package.

"Wonder if there's a letter from — Yippee! Here 'tis."

Sam swiveled his head on his leathery neck to look wonderingly at the half-sneer that was frozen on Hibbens' mouth. "Ike and Tom and Brady work for the Bell Seven outfit. It's one of the biggest left in this neck of the woods," the stage driver explained. "Tom's already a top rider, and mighty soon Brady's goin' to make a real hand too."

"How interestin'!" muttered Hibbens.

SAM winced as if something sharp had gouged him. "Ol' Ike's got plenty cow savvy. Froze his feet in a blizzard on the Wyomin' plains, ridin' herd on three hundred dogies — which same he pulled through."

"Tom!" yelled Brady excitedly. "Here they are. Buckskin gauntlets just like those in the catalog. Are they honeys!"

"Uh-huh," agreed Tom, and went on reading his letter.

"Swelligant," approved Sam, his eyes bright with interest. "Them shirts for you, Ike?"

"Yeh. Will I doll up. The flower-stamped cuffs are mine, too."

"Reckon everything's here," said Brady. "Thanks a million, Sam."

"Don't mention it, boys. Kirk, look at Tom's nose glued to that letter. It's from his gal. Purtiest little schoolma'am ever hit this neck o' the woods. Tom had plenty competition when she taught on Buffalo Flats last summer.

"I mind how me and Tom ribbed it up atween us that I'd sneak her into town on the stage while Rick Mayers

drove out to get her in his buggy. That dance was half over before Rick larned how he'd been whipsawed!" He slapped his leg.

The other punchers were tying their new possessions to their saddles, but Tom pocketed his letter and drew on his new gauntlets as if he didn't even see them.

"Do we just sit here all day, Sam?" Hibbens inquired with extravagant politeness. "Sit and get sunburned and eaten alive?"

The words slapped the old driver and riled him, but he clucked to the team. The stage dipped into a wide swale and rattled over a bridge that spanned a creek whose water had been churned by two hundred-odd cattle, now bunched up, and fighting flies. When Hibbens didn't even glance at the herd, Sam forbore telling a lot of interesting things about cattle. Only after the stage had climbed out of the swale did he call his companion's attention to a prairie dog colony.

"Them little dinguses make mighty nice pets."

"Who wants a pet?"

Sam halted his team when a mother sage hen led her brood across the road, and again tried to interest his prospective buyer.

"Ain't the little ones cute? And look away yonder,," he exclaimed, excitement threading his voice. "Four antelope! Only band left on these flats. But over on Buffalo Flats one lone buck antelope runs with a bunch of horses all the time. Ain't it a shame the rest of his tribe's gone?"

Kirk Hibbens slapped at the gnats and grunted non-committally.

Sam went on with a touch of sadness, "Glad I had the joy of seein' this country before it was all settled up. Still, I've got so I like people gosh-awful much. You know, come winter, Kirk, there ain't enough travel to keep this ridge road open, so I follow a snow trail up along the valley through the meadows and the willows.

"The ranchers along the creek, feeding hay to their stock, help keep the trail packed down solid and good. It runs right past most of their homes and, by gollies, in winter I really get to know the folks along my route."

Hibbens yawned loudly. "Yeh?"

Sam glanced briefly at the man, an odd sense of frustration crowding up in him. He had reckoned that telling how fine the people were was good sales talk. He didn't have to mention the few exceptions. In any bunch of horses there was always one or more ornery ones.

Same way with ranch folks. Hibbens would learn for himself how a certain rancher was a tricky crook; how another was a deadbeat, always pestering Sam to buy a jug of whisky and bring it to him, with no intention of ever paying for it.

"Yes, sir, I get close to these folks," Sam continued reminiscently. "The men and boys are always doin' nice things, like openin' gates or bars when they see me comin'. And lots of places, the women'll have coffee and doughnuts or pie for me. They'll say, 'Sam, you come right in and get a cup of hot coffee before you go on in this storm.' It don't make no difference who these women are — grandmas or middle-aged wives or young gals.

"And places like Jerry Smith's, where there are little kids. Three-four little bundled-up, red-nosed tikes come runnin' to meet me, mebbe draggin' a sled. 'Hi, Sam. You got the things Mama sent for?' I'll tell 'em 'Yes,' and that I've got something, too, for a good girl and a stout feller—which I know doggoned well they're expectin'.

"Kirk, I've been half froze to death, shackin' along with a pokey team on a tough snow trail, and then I'll come to the Smith place — there's others, too — and them little kids warm me all up inside. You're going to like drivin' this stage, Kirk, even if it ain't a six-horse ramblin' outfit."

AGAIN Sam looked at Kirk Hibbens and again he experienced sharp disappointment. With his upper lip sort of twisted, the man was gazing into the distant horizon as if he'd been enduring Sam's chatter but wasn't really interested.

The team stopped at a mail box marked "Jerry Smith" and Sam, more deeply concerned than ever, got down from his seat. Rheumatic twinges in his legs

made him wince, reminding him of another strong reason why he must sell his outfit. He was getting too used up to stand the gaff.

Unloading a box of groceries, he planted it by the post, exchanged the mail sack from the box for the one he had with him, and clambered back to his seat.

"Too bad Benny and Jimmy and Sue are missin' me today," he commented. "But they'll think of old Sam when their mama looks through that box of stuff."

Hibbens showed a flicker of interest. "Meaning?"

Sam chuckled with satisfaction. "There's a little somethin' extra in it for the kiddies."

The prospective buyer fished a cigar from his vest pocket and lighted it. "The family's so poor they can't buy their brats 'extras'?"

"We-ell, they shore have been scratchin'. But then most of the folks hereabouts ain't what you'd call filthy rich. Old man Bell — the cowboys we met work for him — was sittin' pretty until one hard winter three years ago, when he lost more than a thousand cattle. Did that hurt! I'd see them poor dogies on feed grounds as I drove along. They just made my heart bleed. 'Twas a terrible winter! Only way I could locate any of the fences was by a little bit of the tops of bucks or posts sticking out of the snow. Why, I could tell you—"

Sam clamped his lips. He had not intended to speak of the harsh winters. It seemed, however, that Hibbens' mind was on something else, for he was asking, "How much d'yuh charge for hauling stuff out from Red Fern? Like that box yuh just delivered?"

"Charge? Shuckins, I'm glad to do it."

"I'll be darned! Well, a lot of these moochers'll get a jolt when I take over. Now where are yuh goin'?"

Sam had turned off the main road and was driving across sagebrush toward a lone cabin, beyond which a small lake with alkali-encrusted edges shone like a mirror. Turning over in his mind what Hibbens had just said, and getting the full impact of its meaning, he did not answer.

"Mebbe this is another of those little extras!" Hibbens remarked bitingly.

The stage drew up in front of the shack. On the outside wall hung a battered washtub. Three logs of firewood and an axe, a grindstone and two spools of barbed wire littered the front yard. But there were white curtains at the one window, and the woman who appeared at the door was neat and clean, for all she was plainly dressed.

Hibbens looked her over with contemptuous indifference, but Sam tipped his hat and jumped to the ground, "Mornin', Mrs. Dunn." He went around to the rear of the stage and busied himself with a box tied on the boot.

"You know what, ma'am? Several of the neighbors down 'long the creek chipped in and said for me to get yuh this little bill of grub. Knowin' how Jack was taken sick and all, they just hoped you'd accept it till he gets on his feet. How's Jack this mornin'?"

The woman was smiling uncertainly, her color high. "I — I hadn't thought the neighbors wanted us homesteading here," she began. "Oh, Jack's better. He'll soon be on his feet."

"That's good!" Sam was uncomfortable himself. These Dunns were starving, but they had pride. He had tried to figure out how to get around that pride. "Mrs. Dunn, this box shows yuh how the neighbors really feel."

He set down the heavy box, for it looked as if the embarrassed woman wasn't going to let him carry it into the house. "Sorry there's no mail. P'rhaps next time. Good luck."

As he turned the stage out of the forlorn yard he heard the woman say, "Thank you, Sam. But you ain't fooling me. I know who bought this grub!"

They were back on the road, the team shacking along and the sun climbing higher, before Hibbens said, "Heck! Sooner they starve out the better, you old fool."

Sam pretended indifference, and let the brutal remark ride along. Lots of folks figured just the same as Kirk about dry land homesteaders — as if they were hardly humans. But these Dunns now — Jack'd soon take a tumble to himself. He'd learn, the hard way, that his land was no good and that this high mountain country wasn't made for farming.

Then he and his wife would take a man-and-woman job on one of the river valley ranches and get along fine. Giving them a lift now was like — why, it was like pulling a bogged cow out of a mud-hole.

DUST trailed behind the lumbering stage; dust settled on the two silent men. There was no other travel on the road, and for many miles Sam merely attended to the routine of swapping mail sacks at boxes he passed. Then at one box he found an envelope pinned to the sack he pulled out. He took from this envelope a ten-dollar bill, a filled-out mail order with addressed envelope, and a note to the driver. It read:

"Sam, please buy a money order for me and mail this letter. Yours Red."

Hibbens broke his long silence. "So you have to put up with this sort of thing, too? I'd call it an imposition."

Unable to think of the right thing to say, Sam took refuge in silence. But when his team stopped at Fred Lind's mail box and Sam saw a newspaper-wrapped package in the box, his face lighted. He unloaded a plow point and a bag of fence staples, exchanged the mail sacks, and then, with the package in his hands, looked triumphantly at his companion.

"Here's the other side of that 'little extras' business! This is a mess of fresh trout, and old Fred's wrapped 'em in cold leaves so they'll keep till I can fry 'em. Fred's batchin' and workin' 'bout sixteen hours a day, yet he's not too busy to catch me these trout. Folks along my route is shore thoughtful."

"Well, well," jeered Hibbens, lifting his eyebrows. "I haven't noticed anyone else being thoughtful of you!"

"I'll betcha four bits that when we swing back toward town along the Blue Fork, I'll find a loaf of fresh bread in the Swanson mail box. What's more, when we come past Johnson's box, Johnson's little bit of a gal'll be waitin' for me on her pony to hand me a bag of doughnuts."

Pleasant thoughts crinkled the lines around Sam's eyes and lips as he drove on to Sage Creek post office, which served an outlying district. Here, he showed the prospective buyer another team of horses and some additional equipment for the stage route, including a sled.

Hibbens asked what it cost the driver for meals and for the care and feed of the team he kept here. Sam mentioned ridiculously low figures, and said, "Now I'm shore you want to buy me out."

To his keen disappointment the man replied that the horses and equipment were not up to his expectations. So, after dinner, when the old-timer drove his fresh team across a wide flat and then down along a ridge above the valley of the Blue Fork, he was feeling pretty low. But he cheered up amazingly when, as he had predicted, he found a loaf of fresh bread in the Swanson mail box.

Two miles farther along, at the Morrel box, a gray-haired grandmother was on hand to greet him. Grandma Morrel just couldn't get into town, what with the men-folks so busy irrigating and fencing and riding after cattle. In Red Fern would Sam get for her— It was an intricate order—knitting material and different kinds of cloth and ribbons and buttons.

Sam, listening attentively and asking questions so he would get every detail right, nevertheless had Hibbens in the corner of his eye, and saw how he was squirming. The sun was now blistering hot, and the gnats had taken a great fancy to the new man.

Soon after, Sam met Johnson's "little bit of a girl"—nine years old. For several minutes he chatted with her before he gave her "a little s'prise." She declared she was "terribly surprised, and tickled to death," but Sam knew she had expected the surprise of those gumdrops.

And, sure enough, she had a bag of doughnuts for him.

As the stage moved onward, funny thoughts entered old Sam's head, thoughts about things he'd been taking for granted. Of course he was hoping this would be his last trip, but somehow or other he wasn't telling folks that it was. His one experience in telling Mrs. Titus had been too upsetting, both to the woman and to Sam himself.

"Well, we're only eight miles from town," he remarked to his silent com-

panion. "How you like the set-up by now, Kirk?"

"Okay, except these 'little extras,' as you call them, get my goat."

"But you've seen the other side of the picture now. T'night at my little cabin we'll have fresh bread, fresh trout and doughnuts for supper."

Hibbens brushed that aside. "I'll board at the hotel. I timed you with that grandma. Twenty minutes! The nerve of the old hen, asking a man to—"

"Mighty sweet lady, Kirk. Mighty sweet. And the life she's had. Long time ago, she threw a dipper of scaldin' water in a buck Injun's face and stampeded that buck and four of his scalp hunters. I could tell you—"

"Don't!" said Hibbens curtly.

Sam cut one of the horses with the whip as an outlet for something turbulent pestering his thoughts. He was instantly contrite. "Dad burn! I didn't mean that, Ned. Hand sorta slipped."

HE SQUINTED his eyes toward the McKee mail box, hoping Connie wouldn't be there today. But Connie was there, and for a moment Sam's eyes sparkled with pleasure before they turned somber. He reckoned he must tell Kirk Hibbens about the little game he and Connie had worked out. But he'd put off telling this secret till—till after the papers were signed, anyhow.

Dave McKee, Connie's widower father, was a mean old cuss. Worked the daylights out of Connie and watched her like a cat watching a gopher hole. Afraid she'd marry and he'd lose his housekeeper and slave. Yes, slave, McKee being the kind who believed his daughter was his property.

Even if Connie was eighteen, McKee had kept the local beaus herded away from her, and never let her go alone any place farther off the ranch than the mail box.

But a year back had come a mighty pert young fellow, a mining engineer on vacation, whom Sam had sized up as tops.

This Dan Holmes had been fishing along the Blue Fork, on her dad's land, when he met Connie. Later, Connie had told Sam about the meeting, so wonderfully thrilling and romantic. But McKee had got wise and how he had stomped on that romance!

Sam reckoned the ornery old coot'd bite himself and die of his own poison if he knew how Dan and Connie were writing to one another regularly. That was where Sam came in. If Connie was waiting to pick up the mail, well and good. But if McKee was with her, or was apt to get hold of the sack before Connie did, there'd be no letter from Dan in it. Sam would have the letter in his pocket and he'd leave it at a certain sand rock half a mile farther along. It was likely he'd pick up one there from Connie to Dan, too.

For well on to ten months Sam had been playing Cupid, and McKee hadn't yet caught on. But if Sam was actually going to stop driving this stage, he and Connie must confide this secret to the new man. And somehow or other, Sam didn't like that idea at all.

The stage drew up at the mail box, and a slender girl with clear blue eyes and tawny hair and the fair, rose-tinted complexion of a Scotch lassie, gave the old-timer her warm smile.

"Hello there, Sam! You're behind time," she greeted him. "I've got fresh butter for you. It's packed in this little pail with ice around it."

Just the sight of her warmed the cockles of old Sam's heart and quickened its beat. The world was better and sweeter for Connie's being in it. She glanced uncertainly at Hibbens, but Sam smiled reassuringly as he took the pail and the sack she handed him.

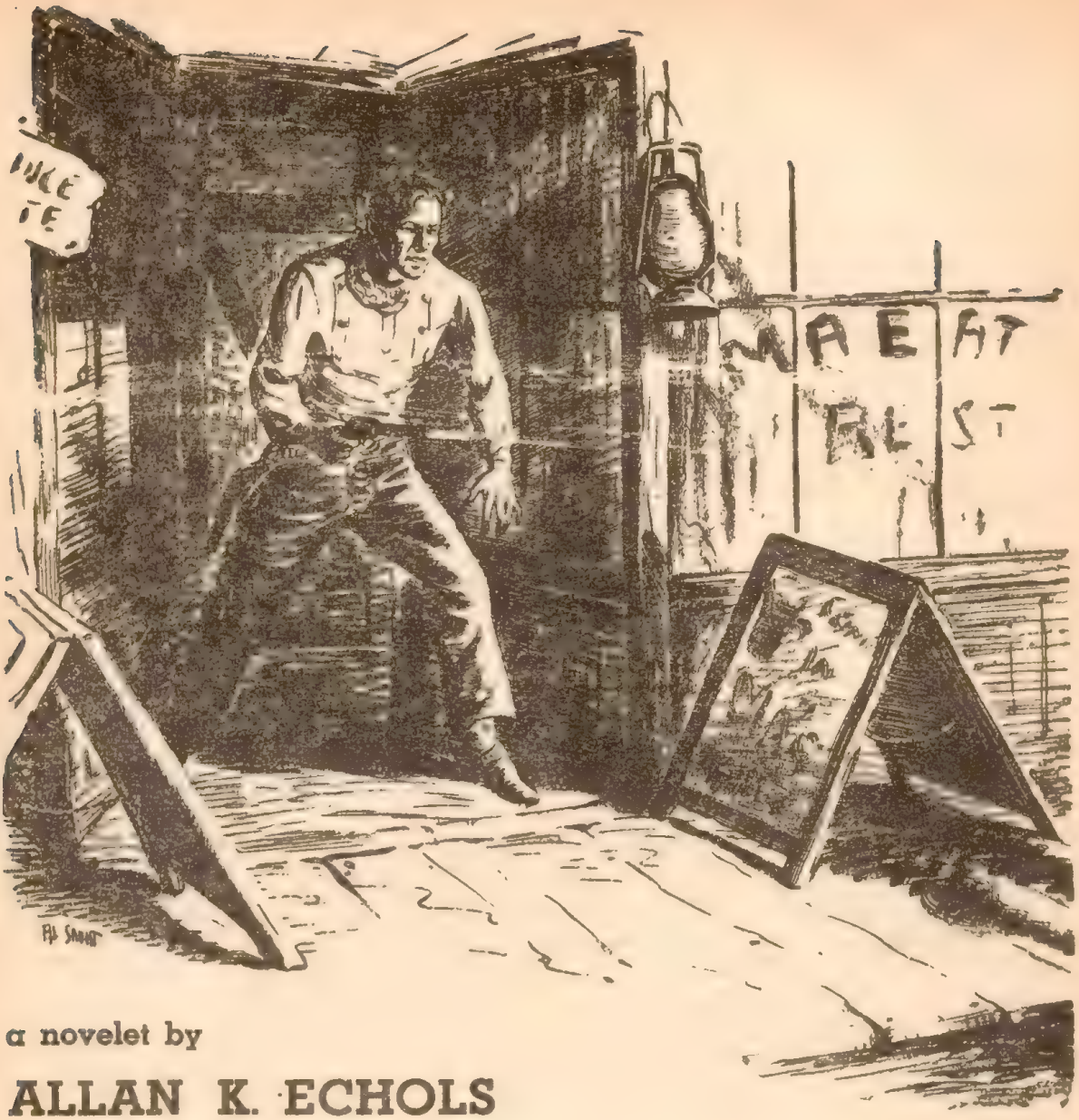
Tossing the other sack to her, he drawled, "Reckon mebbe the package you're lookin' for's there."

Seeing her face light, he thought, "Dan's doin' right well now, down in old Mexico. He'll be sending for Connie. Will she get up spunk enough to tell McKee where to head in. By gollies, I reckon she'll be expectin' me to advise her and help her. And I can't let Connie down."

After they had talked a few moments, Sam tipped his hat and drove along, and Hibbens burst out, "You might have introduced me to that girl!"

"Yeh?" It was Sam's turn to be noncommittal.

(Concluded on page 78)



a novelet by

ALLAN K. ECHOLS

CHAPTER I

You'll Generally Smell Gunsmoke

HE HAD ridden into Sundown alone and stabled his horse during the middle of the afternoon. That was not the usual way with strangers, for most of them came in with the herds from one of the two trails that joined here. Now he was asking the man for a room here at Seeger's place. Seeger had hotel rooms upstairs and the lobby opened off to Seeger's saloon, back of which was Seeger's gambling parlor. If you were just passing through, chances are Seeger got most of the money you spent in Sundown.

The manager looked over his steel-rimmed glasses and shoved a greasy register book over the pine counter. "Sign here," he said, "and that'll be a dollar a night, in advance."

"No point in that."

THE BUSYBODY

When fast-shooting Jess Rountree came to the town of Sundown and found his dream girl married to the wrong man, he had to use both brains and bullets in order to untie a knotty rangeland problem!

"They all sign," the little man said, scratching his mustache and offering him a pencil.

A flicker of amusement crossed the lean face of the traveler, hovering around his gray eyes. They were eyes which had a cultivated expression of somnolence, but which missed very little. He was a tall man, more than average in a country of tall men, perhaps in his late twenties. His lean body gave the impression of looseness and casualness, and of always being at ease.

He looked thoughtfully at the register a moment, and then reached a decision which brought the smile down to play around the corners of his mouth. He took the pencil and scrawled, "Jess Rountree, Soledad," and tossed the pencil down on the book, along with a silver dollar.

The clerk reversed the book, picked up the dollar and glanced at the name he had signed. Not that it mattered, among all the other "John Brown's" and "Bill Smith's."

Then the clerk drew his breath sharply through his straggling mustache while his eyes widened as he looked over the tops of his lenses. He let the air out of his lungs silently, got his face back into its expressionless shape, and handed Rountree a key.

"Four, at the top of the stairs, Mr. Rountree," he said.

"Thanks. Bring me up a pitcher of wash water."

Rountree went upstairs, took his shirt off and washed and shaved, dusted his shirt, and went back downstairs, and out onto the street to look over the town.

Watching him, was a heavy-set man sitting on a bench in the shade of the awning in front of Perth & Conley's general store. He wore a rusty serge suit which had once been blue, and a derby hat which had once been black. By now, however the sweat and dust had given it a brownish-gray weatherbeaten hue. A star peeked out from under the lapel of his coat.

While Rountree took in the details of the town and stored them in his mind, and while Marshal J. B. Meaders filed away the details of Rountree's features and his actions, the mouse gray manager of the hotel picked up the register. Then he laid the pencil in it to mark the page before he closed it. He took the book under his arm and walked through the lobby, through the deserted saloon, through the deserted rooms with the poker and blackjack and faro layouts, and finally knocked timidly on a door in the far corner, marked "Private, Keep Out."

WHEN his knock was answered he stepped into an office that was done in shining mahogany, with a maroon carpet topped with snow-white goatskin scatter rugs. The man behind the desk was dressed in keeping with the room. He wore the conventional garb of the gambler, black broadcloth and white silk. His face was white by nature and by care and by lack of exposure to sunlight.

There was a difference however. This man's features departed from the almost uniform mold of those of the gambling man in only one respect. Instead of being quite without expression, there was a hint of sardonic amusement which ran shallow beneath the surface—amusement and irony signaled from the corners of his eyes. His straight, oiled black hair was combed severely back, the jet shine accented by a white blaze from the forehead hairline to the tonsure.

"What is it, Merrihew?"

"You said to let you know if anybody ever showed up from down around Soledad way." He carefully opened the register, reversed it and laid it gently on Seeger's desk, then stepped back to wait respectfully.

Seegr glanced down at the register while he groped in a cigar box with a delicate white hand. His hand paused as his eyes rested on the name of Jess Rountree. His controlled face did not change expression. The pause was only momentary. Then the hand brought the cigar out of the box and continued preparing his smoke. Seeger attended to getting his smoke going, then looked up at his clerk. His face was a study in indifference.

"Thanks, Merrihew. That'll be all." He closed the book and slid it back across the desk.

Merrihew obediently took the book and went back to the hotel, his curiosity unsatisfied. The boss had many irons in the fire. There were currents and cross currents under Seeger's roof, but Merrihew missed the significance of most of them.

It was plain that the boss hardly knew he existed. Merrihew was therefore obliged to piece out little signs and clues, and make up for his own colorless life by dreaming dreams. . . .

On the town's single business street, Jess Rountree reached Mother Eaton's Eating House and opened the screen door.

J. B. Meaders folded the knife with which he had been whittling on the bench in the shade of the store, hitched up his gun-belt and strolled over to the hotel lobby. "That feller give you a name?" he asked Merrihew.

Merrihew felt the undercurrents beginning to move around him, and a pulse stirred in his lethargic soul. He felt the blood of conspiracy churn in his sluggish veins. He was a spoke in the wheel of intrigue. He gave due thoughtfulness to the marshal's question, and made his revelation as though he were doing it with reservations—as though he knew the importance of his contribution.

"Why, yes. I know who he is." He waited for Meaders to realize he was holding back something. He was not going to let his own part be treated casually.

"Well, who?" Meaders asked, the July heat making him impatient.

"Jess Rountree." Merrihew tossed the name off easily, as though he were casually dropping a bomb into the hotel lobby, and waited for the reaction, hoping thus to learn something that he was acting as though he already knew.

"Is that so!" Meaders said in a voice that told the clerk he had really dropped something of a bomb. "Well, why didn't you say so? What's he doing here?"

Merrihew shrugged wisely and answered cryptically. "He didn't say. Looking for trouble, you reckon?" He had become pretty good at fishing for information.

Meaders scratched his chin thoughtfully. "That's bad. Bad." He shook his head, and turned to go. "Well, thanks."

Merrihew felt he had been on the verge of learning something, only to have it slip away from him, and he was fearful. "Wait, J. B. Just what have they got against this Rountree, anyway? I mean, that they can prove." He was proud of the way he baited that hook.

The marshal thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at the cuspidor thoughtfully. "Well, I haven't got anything, myself, but wherever there's a Rountree or a Springer, you'll generally smell gunsmoke. And now we've got 'em both."

"Yeah, I know," the clerk lied. "Wonder what started that, anyway?"

"How does any cattle war start? Two families, both outgrowing themselves and stepping on each other's toes. They're all the same, only the Springer-Rountree feud just happened to be bloodier and last longer and spread wider than most of 'em. They'll be talking about the Soledad cattle war when you and me are dead and gone." He took another step, said, "Thanks," and went out the door.

CHAPTER II

Mother Eaton Speaks Her Mind

JESS ROUNTREE stepped into Mother Eaton's restaurant, ducking his head to pass through the door, and halted just inside. The place was cool and white and inviting, but it was not quiet at this minute. The girl behind the counter, wearing a fresh blue apron was having a little trouble with a customer. Anger made her face as red as the ribbon she wore in her black hair, and her brown eyes were snapping.

The girl had just put a sandwich on the counter before a customer, and the man had caught her wrist and was trying to pull her toward him. He was a heavy man in a yellow shirt and shining boots and a thick, shell-stuffed gun-belt. There was a laugh on his coarse face as he held the girl's arm tightly.

"Don't be so touchy, honey," the man said. "I ain't poison."

"You are, to me," the girl said angrily. "Take your hand off me."

"Take it easy. I ain't going to hurt you." He laughed again.

"Turn me loose!"

"Yuh act like you don't like me. I just want to hold yore hand."

The girl picked up the man's coffee with her free hand and poured the steaming liquid over the man's wrist. He jerked it back and cursed, then caught her again before she could get clear of him.

"Hard filly to break, ain't yuh? No wonder Seeger can't handle you. He ain't much of a man."

Rountree walked down the line of stools and jerked the man to his feet by the collar of his shirt.

"The lady said for you to take yore hands off her," he said quietly. "You'd better eat somewhere else from now on."

The man's face went red with anger and his hand streaked for his gun. Rountree's weapon jumped into his hand, his arm went up and brought the pistol down across the man's wrist just as the man got his gun up. The hammer blow of Rountree's weapon knocked the man's gun out of a numbed hand, and it rattled to the floor.

Then Rountree pouched his own weapon, doubled his fists and waded into the man. His left fist drove into the pit of the man's stomach, and the man brought his hands down to cover his middle. Then Rountree's cocked right exploded on the man's jaw and the blow knocked him against the screen door. The door flew open and the man landed full length on the wooden sidewalk outside the restaurant. Rountree stood and waited in the doorway for him to get up.

The big man got to his hands and knees, shook his head dazedly and got to his unsteady feet. But all the fight was not out of him.

"I want my gun," he said.

"You forget yore gun," Rountree replied. "You're not a good man to be runnin' loose with a weapon. And if I hear of you coming back here, I'm going to grade that road out of here with you. Now, git!"

The man's voice dropped to a menacing growl. "You ain't fixin' to grade no road with me, stranger. Men has tried that afore."

"But I haven't, friend," was all that Rountree said.

The man hesitated, debating things a moment, then turned abruptly and headed for Seeger's bar. Rountree watched him a moment, then went and picked up the man's gun and tossed it on the restaurant counter, and sat down.

A stout, good-humored, motherly woman had come up from the kitchen, had seen the fight, and now turned and went back to her domain.

THE girl's flushed face was changing from its anger to an expression which Rountree could not read. There was some kind of emotion playing just beneath the surface as she went automatically through the motions of filling a water glass and placing it before him. The knuckles of her hand were drawn and white.

She stood rigidly behind the counter, and he saw the tension in her. She would be close to twenty-three now, but there was a gravity about her, a thinness, and a tightness which hinted that she had been through more than a girl should be in the four years since he had seen her.

He saw that the laughter was all gone from her face and the quick smile was missing. The brave front had now been replaced with one of alert suspicion. But still Sally Springer was a pretty girl, and Jess Rountree felt the old longing in him which had been there since before their families had thrown the whole of Soledad County into a bloody war.

Her face was grave, and reserve held her tightly in its grip. She was like a bird poised, ready to fly at the first sign of trouble.

"Thank you, Jess," she said. "That man is a brute. But what are you doing here? I didn't know they were driving this early."

"I didn't come with a drive." He watched her and saw her become alert to danger.

"Passing through?"

"No. I came here to see someone."

"Who?"

The question escaped her before she could thrust it back.

"You."

He said it straight, and watched her reaction closely. He had ridden a long dry trail to reach this moment, and he had to hear and understand everything about it, what was said, what was not said, and the unspoken feelings behind everything.

He saw the pink rise in her cheeks—the nervousness of her hands. There was turmoil not far beneath the surface of her, and he tried to read its meaning. She framed her answer carefully, and found it weak and meaningless, concealing the things that were going on in her.

"It's nice of you to think of me," she said, and was not at all satisfied with her

own feeble answer. "After everything that's happened. You know, of course, that I'm married to Orlin Seeger?"

"Yes, I know that. But that couldn't stop a man from thinking about you, Sally. It's not that easy. When a man has held the girl he loved in his arms, and felt her heart beat against his, when a man—"

"Please!" There was anguish in her protest. "Please, Jess. I told you I was married."

He got his own heart-hunger under control again and said, "I'm sorry. I'll try to behave."

"What did you come for?" she asked practically. This hurt too much, and she wanted to get the torture over.

"Because I thought I ought to, for one thing. And because I wanted to see if you were happy, for another. Look, Sally, that trouble was between my father and yores. They were old-school, free-range men, and bullheaded as they come. But they both paid for it, Sally. They're gone, and the fight is over. Fortunately for us, neither of them killed the other directly, although they were probably both equally to blame for the whole thing. And to blame for separating us.

The girl became thoughtful. "As you look back on it, yes. But it didn't seem so then. Hatred is contagious, and you can't take sides against your own flesh and blood." She forced a smile. "I'm glad you came and told me that, Jess. It's not good to go on disliking people who were once your friends. I'm glad it's over."

"Yes, it's over—all but the effect of it. But the after effect is something else again. Sally, are you happy with Seeger?"

She bit her lip. "What makes you ask that? You haven't any right."

"No, except for one thing. I learned about you being here from Dobe Morrison. He was passing through with a cattle drive. He saw you working here, and so he did a little asking around. He said you weren't even living with Seeger, and that Seeger was a skunk and a crook and about everything else that you wouldn't like.

"If that's so, Sally, and if you are not living with him, then there's plenty wrong, and you're not happy. I still think as much of you as I ever did, and so yore happiness is my business. That's the way I feel about it, and that's why I came up here to ask you if you were happy."

The girl's hands were unconsciously twisting the towel in her hand, and she did not know that she was betraying her emotional battle.

She said, "It makes me feel good to know you still think that much of me, Jess. But there's nothing you can do. I'm married and that's the end of it. I'll make out all right."

MOTHER EATON, the buxom woman, came out of the kitchen wiping her perspiring face with a towel, and joined them. She leaned over the counter, her fleshy arms crossed, and looked Rountree over with studious care. She turned her head and asked, "Is this the young man you were telling me about, Sally?"

The question was direct and embarrassing, and in her confusion, Sally introduced them.

"Jess, this is Mother Eaton. This is Jess Rountree, from Soledad."

"Hello, Jess," Mrs. Eaton acknowledged. "Well, Sally wasn't lying; you look like considerable of a man, from where I'm standing." Her voice was plain, pleasant, and above all, sincere.

Sally's face turned red, and Mother Eaton ignored the fact that, as she well knew, she was making Sally uncomfortable.

"Sally's told me a lot about you, and so I'm going to tell you a lot about her. Of course I heard what you were saying. I'm a regular old busybody and gossip, and I'm mighty well interested in anything that concerns Sally. Now, here's how—"

"Mother Eaton!" Sally's protest fell on deaf ears.

"Of course things are not all right with Sally," the stout woman rambled on. "That crooked, ghost-faced Orlin Seeger is a dirty coyote that's got her afraid to move. He fooled her into marrying him in the first place, while she was in Soledad to get away from the ranch while you-all's trouble was going on.

"He told Sally he was a merchant and hotel man, but he didn't tell her that his merchandise was liquor, that the hotel was just incidental to his liquor and gambling, and engineering raids on trail herds, and selling stolen cattle, and I don't know

what-all else. He was in Soledad looking for a location when he met her. When they was married they came up here. As soon as she found out what he was up to she left him, and came to me for a job."

"Please, Mother Eaton—"

"Now you just shut up, Sally, and let me talk a minute. I can't get a word in edgeways. Anyway, as I was saying, she left him, and wouldn't live with him as man and wife. He'd have come and took her, but he knew if he laid a hand on her while she was under my protection, it'd be over my dead body. Meaders and the rest of the decent men around here would have hung him quicker than hell can scorch a feather.

"What you're wonderin', Jess, is does she still love you. And she won't tell you because she's got too much respect for her marriage vows, but you just let this old gossip tell you that you're the only person she ever did and ever will love. I know she's going to scold me for telling you this. But now that you know it, young man, you better go out and tend to Orlin Seeger right, or you don't deserve her, and don't show up till you do.

"Another thing, Jess Rountree—watch out for him. Know that big ox you just kicked out of here? Well, that's Rud Horton. He's the boy that does Seeger's rough stuff for him. He's sweet on Sally, too, but he don't dare show it unless he's drunk. Afraid of Seeger. So, Seeger might send him to take care of you, or he might lay for you on his own hook. I'm just warning you. And now, what was you saying, Sally?"

The old woman wiped her face after this long effort, and looked at Sally.

SALLY had begun to cry somewhere during Mother Eaton's story. Yet it was plain that the old woman's well-meant busybodying, her complete coverage of everything Sally had not meant to say, and above all, her good-humored admission that she was meddling, had all been in behalf of the girl under her protection. All this was naturally too much for Sally. For the first time in months a smile broke across her face. Jess was smiling, too. Whatever else might be the result of Mother Eaton's efforts, she had cleared away a lot of things and left the situation exposed in a mighty short time.

Jess found Sally's hand, and got a fleeting answering pressure. "Well," he said. "Now I know what I've got to do."

"That's right," Mother Eaton said shortly. "There's only one cure for Sally's trouble, and that is a bullet right through the middle button of Orlin Seeger's pretty white silk shirt."

Sally's face lost its moment of happiness, and the old sadness came back to it.

"No," she pleaded, "there just isn't any cure. That wouldn't help. It would always stand between us, always. No, Jess, you can't kill him. There isn't any way out. It was my fault that I was taken in by him, but I could never come to you after you'd killed him to get him out of the way. I just couldn't."

"You little dunce," Mother Eaton said. But Rountree saw in the old woman's eyes a great pride in the moral strength of the girl she was protecting.

Mother Eaton started back toward the kitchen, untying her apron as she walked. She picked up the pistol Rountree had thrown on the counter. She came out in a moment with her face powdered with a faint touch of starch, and wearing a big black hat with daisies that bounced with each step she took. "You two stay here and talk over old times, will you? I've just thought of something I want down to the store."

CHAPTER III

Orlin Seeger Makes A Bet

A HEAVY stride propelling her heavy body along the sidewalk, Mother Eaton passed several men, who said, "Hello, Ma," and she answered, "Hello, Ed." "Hello, Joe, how's the baby?" "Hi, Duke. Who was that gal you was sparkin' last night?" and so on until she reached the shaded porch of Perth & Conley's Store.

She sat down on the wooden bench beside J. B. Meaders. The old marshal closed his knife, and tipped the faded derby hat further forward on his forehead, knowing she had something on her mind. She wiped the perspiration from her face and commented on the heat. He agreed with her and waited for her to start in her own

way. He had long since learned that she was going to do things her own way, anyhow.

"Kinda quiet, ain't it?" she asked. "Expecting any cattle?"

"Nope," he answered. "To early for anybody to be driving yet. There's still grass south of here. Had good rains last month."

"Yeah," she said. "Not any danger of you bein' out looking for any stolen trail cattle then, is there?"

Meaders lifted that rusty derby and mopped his red, bald head, wondering what she was getting at. "No, I don't reckon there'll be any cattle stolen until some comes along to be stole."

Ma shook her head. "That's too bad, ain't it? It would simplify things mighty well."

"What'd you have in mind?" Meaders asked, taking the cue that was expected.

"Rud Horton's bothering Sally again, and it's gone too far."

"And you want me to catch him in somethin' I can kill him for. That's a little rough on him, ain't it?"

"He's been needin' killing ever since the day he was born," Mother Eaton snapped.

"Fact of the matter is," Meaders offered, "I never did think much of just goin' out and killing a man because you didn't like him, or suspected him of being a skunk."

"You've killed plenty of 'em in your day."

"Mebbe, but never except to save my own life, or when they refused to be taken."

"That was what I had in mind," Mother Eaton said.

Meaders whistled. "Ma, I didn't know you was such a cold-blooded old gal. You had in mind Horton gettin' killed resistin' arrest.

"I ain't cold-blooded, but Sally's happiness comes first with me, no matter how many skunks have to be cleaned out." She got to her feet. "Well," she added. "That leaves nothing for me to do but to go straight to Orlin Seeger and have him make Rud let her alone."

Meaders perked up. "Now, listen, Ma, if you tell Seeger about Rud foolin' with Sally, Seeger will shoot him down the minute he lays eyes on him."

Mother Eaton grinned. "I wish you hadn't told me that. It's going to bother my conscience somethin' awful. But, still and all, I've got to think of Sally."

Meaders got to his feet, a beaten man, as he always was in encounters with the old woman. "All right, Ma, mebbe you're ready to say what's on your mind."

"I ain't joking," she said seriously. "Either you've got to go right now and tell Seeger about Rud, or I'm going to march right into that dive and do it myself."

"I'll do it," Meaders agreed reluctantly. "But you know what you're doing? You're signing Rud Horton's death warrant."

"My conscience would be clear even if I thought so, but I don't think so," the old lady said. "You going right now?"

"All right. All right, Ma. I'll go."

Meaders took a deep breath and started down toward Orlin Seeger's place. He believed that Seeger would kill Horton, and the fact that he would be a party to carrying the news that would set it off troubled him somewhat. He salved his conscience with arguments as he went along. If he didn't do it, Mother Eaton surely would, for she was a woman of her word, and unafraid of a dozen Seegers and Hortons.

And there was Sally to think of. He thought as much of her as Mother Eaton did, and surely her safety from Horton was of more importance than what happened to Seeger and his crooked gunman-thief, whatever else dirty he could think of, and the like. By the time he got into Seeger's door, he had convinced himself that he was doing his duty, and was doing it on his own initiative.

That is—he had almost convinced himself. Still, he could not get over the feeling that there was more to this than Mother Eaton had told him. For instance, there was this Rountree fellow in town, a man that the campfire yarns credited with having killed anywhere from four to fourteen Springer men single-handed, according to who was telling the yarn and how many drinks he'd had.

WHEN Mother Eaton saw the marshal disappear into Seeger's, she trotted as briskly as her weight allowed her, down to Dan Daniels' livery. As she suspected she would, she found Rud Hor-

ton and Dan playing two-handed coon-can with a greasy deck of cards on a barrel head.

"I want to see you, Rud," she said in a voice that was not a request, but an order.

Horton followed her back into the darkness around the rear stalls. She pulled his gun out from somewhere in the ample folds of her dress and handed it to him.

"I thought you'd better have this handy," she said. "After all, you might be needin' it as soon as Seeger gets sight of you."

The man took the gun and jammed it into his empty holster. "How come?" he asked suspiciously.

"You wouldn't know, would you?" Mother Eaton asked. "Did you ever know anybody that tried to take anything away from Orlin Seeger—money or a woman, or anything else, that lived to profit by it? He's heard about you trying to drag Sally out of the restaurant by her wrist a while ago. Right now he's chewing up nails and spittin' carpet tacks. If you live till sundown, I'll be surprised, Horton. I feel sorry for you. I sure do." She turned and started out of the stable.

"You feel sorry for me, do yuh?" the man repeated, his wounded self-esteem boiling up in him. "So I won't last till sundown, and yuh feel sorry for me? Well, just keep yore eyes open, Ma. Then see who you're sorry for. I've been waitin' for a showdown with that lily-livered polecat."

Mother Eaton paused and studied him a moment. "You might get by, Seeger, if you were as lucky as a man with a pocketful of moonstones, but the girl has got other friends. One of them just rode in a little while back."

"Yeah," Rud Horton said. "I've met the gent. And I hope to meet him again. And you feel sorry for me. Well." He paused, then added, "Well, well. She feels sorry for me."

Rud Horton waited until the old woman was gone, then he checked his gun to see that they had not tampered with the shells. Satisfied, he shoved the weapon in his holster, went and saddled his horse, borrowed another one from Daniels, and led them down the street.

He brought them into the alley back of Seeger's and left them ground hitched. He followed along the side of the building unobserved, until he got to the window off Seeger's private office. Here he paused and listened, hearing an occasional movement within. He finally came to the conclusion that Seeger was alone. He gave a quick glance around and still no one was in sight.

He drew his gun and holding it in his hand, crossed his arms, thus concealing the weapon under his left arm. Then he went and leaned in the open window and put a fixed smile on his face while he waited for Seeger to see him.

Seeger was seated at his desk just inside the window going over bills. He looked up at length and saw the upper part of Horton framed in the window.

Horton smiled at him. "Heard you was lookin' for me." He had his elbows crossed on the window sill, and he seemed very casual and friendly, leaning there in the window, the gun in his hand below the level of the sill.

"Yes," Seeger answered. "Fellow just came to town name of Rountree. Seen him yet?"

"Yeah. Sort of bumped into him a while ago."

"No friend of yours, is he?"

"Not to speak of. Matter of fact, I don't much like the way he parts his hair."

"Then you wouldn't cry too much at his burying, would you?"

"Not too much."

"I bet you would."

"How much?"

"Oh, a couple of hundred."

"Nope, that gent is somewhat hard to manicure. I wouldn't want to gamble for less than twenty-five beautiful golden Double Eagles."

Seeger took a chamois bag out of a drawer and laid five stacks of five twenty-dollar gold pieces on the window sill. "That's just the amount I'd be willing to bet," he said.

HORTON dribbled a stack of the coins through the fingers of his left hand, keeping the gun in his right still hidden. "It's a bet," he said. "He'll have a buryin' in twenty-four hours, and I won't be there weepin'. So you lose yore bet."

He picked up the money and pocketed it. "Was that all yuh had in mind?"

Seeger blew his cigar smoke toward the ceiling and said, "No. There was one other little matter. Don't amount to much. You know the difference between your eyes and your hands, don't you?"

"In a general way," Horton beamed. "Why?"

"I thought maybe you might have 'em mixed. When I told you to keep your eyes on my wife, I didn't mean your hands. I didn't even mean for you to touch her."

"Well, now," Horton said thoughtfully. "Mebbe she don't feel the same way you do about me. Ever think of that?"

"I've thought of that, and it hasn't worried me. As a matter of fact, I've reached a very definite conclusion about it. And that is, if I thought for a minute that she was the kind of person that could even stand the sight of you, I'm sure I wouldn't be slightly interested in her. But, she's a woman with at least ordinary sensibilities, so it stands to reason that she wouldn't want you to come within ten feet of her. Does that answer your question?"

"Why, that's one answer, Orlin, but I don't think it's the right one. Matter of fact, she's shown such a dislike at even the thought of you, that there's only one thing a gentleman could do for such a lady in distress, and that is to get rid of you for her, and take over her protection hisself. And being somewhat of a gentleman, I thought I'd do that little job. I just thought too, I'd let yuh know beforehand what it's all about. Any objections?"

Seeger's amused eyes crinkled around the corners. He took a deep drag on his cigar and exhaled the smoke. "Why, no. If you can manage it." He looked at the door across the room and said, "All right, Ted. Take care of him."

Horton turned his head toward the door, and turned it back just as quickly, catching Seeger in the act of bringing a derringer out of his desk drawer. He laughed out loud, lifted the pistol above the level of the window sill and shot Seeger dead in his chair.

Seeger's derringer dropped back into the desk drawer as his body jolted against the chair back from the impact of the bullet. The white blaze in his back hair fell like a cowlick over his forehead. Then his head fell over on his desk and lay buried in his arms, as though he were catching a short nap. Horton jammed his gun into his holster, spat in through the window.

"You cheap gambler," Rud Horton sneered. "You thought you was the bull of the woods, didn't yuh? I wish yuh was here to watch my smoke from now on."

He turned and picked up the reins of the two horses, and led them down to the entrance of the alley.

CHAPTER IV

Quick on the Draw

MOTHER EATON had Jess Rountree and Sally in the kitchen with her. She had spread a red checked tablecloth on one of the kitchen tables, and was frying chicken for them when the marshal walked in the front. Finding it deserted, he went behind the counter and continued to the kitchen.

Appearing as though she hadn't seen him recently, Mother Eaton spoke. "Why, hello, Meaders. How are you?"

"Still alive," he answered wryly, and his gaze turned to the couple at the table. "Hello, Sally."

"Howdy, Mr. Meaders," she answered, and there was a tone of gladness in her voice that Meaders had never heard. This had something to do with Mother Eaton's dark and mysterious ways, he sensed.

"That's Jess Rountree," the old woman said. "Him and her were sweethearts before their daddies got their squirrel guns to each other. Judgin' by Jess, that must have been a bunch of full-grown men puttin' on a full-grown war. It's all over now, and Jess is up to see Sally."

Meaders shook hands with Rountree, and liked his looks. Mother Eaton turned around from the stove with a deep-fry basket full of golden brown chicken. "Well, set," she said. "As long as you're here, you might as well eat, though I don't usually feed chicken to the general run of customers. You must have smelled it cooking."

Jess Rountree sensed that the woman was talking, not to say something, but to hide something. He threw a question-

ing glance at Sally and she shrugged slightly.

Meaders removed the rusty derby and hung it carefully on a temporarily empty pan hook. He wiped the bald top of his head and sat down with a great sigh of anticipation.

"So the Soledad cattle war is all over," he said to Rountree. "Used to hear a lot of wild tales about that trouble, how it started, how many was killed and the like. Never did learn the real truth. Just what did happen?"

"Oh," Rountree replied, "same thing that usually happens. One thing led to another, and pretty soon everybody was in it. Then it died down. That's about all there was to it."

"I see," Meaders said gravely. "Shore glad to get the straight of it from somebody that knows."

They were perhaps midway through with the meal when Meaders perked up his ears, poised a knife full of mashed potatoes and peas halfway up to his mouth.

"What's that?" the sheriff asked. "I heard a gun."

Mother Eaton, who was busy serving them instead of eating with them, dropped a pot down on the stove. "Nothing. I didn't hear anything," she lied.

She rattled a pot several more times, in case there should be any more shots. But there were not.

"Sounded like shootin' to me," Meaders said.

"You're crazy," Ma Eaton snapped. "You're always hearing things."

Mother Eaton filled their plates again, then stepped over to the little service hole that was cut out of the partition, glanced out to the street and saw a man leading two saddle horses across the street toward her place. She went over and picked up a water bucket and went to the table.

"Meaders," she said, "I hate to disturb you, but would you go out to the well and get me a bucket of water? Hurry, the kettle is dry and it'll crack in a minute."

MEADERS took the napkin out of his vest and went out the back door, puzzled. Mother Eaton was already hovering over Rountree, saying in a low voice, "Rud Horton's coming across the street with blood in his eye. Better not let him get inside."

Rountree was on his feet instantly, had his gun-belt down off the nail and was strapping it on as he went out behind the counter and out to the front. Rud Horton was just stepping up onto the boardwalk.

"Lookin' for me, Horton?"

"You're danged right, and the gal, too. And now let's see how good yuh are when a man has got an equal draw with you."

"You'd better think it over, Horton," Rountree said quietly. "You're making trouble for yoreself."

"None I can't handle," Horton barked. "I said I wanted that gal, and I mean to take her. Step aside or pull yore iron, you half-baked horned frog."

Horton was using his last words to hold Rountree's attention while his own hand streaked for his weapon. But it did not hold Rountree's attention, for he had never been attending the man's words. His eyes had been fastened on Horton's feet. And he had seen the feet adjust themselves slightly as Horton went into balance to make his draw. This was as much of a signal as Rountree needed, for he was not a new hand at this kind of thing. The Soledad war had taught him many bitter lessons.

Rountree thus shot him through the heart, and though Horton's muscles triggered his gun wildly, he was a dead man before he fell to the ground.

One of these wild bullets grazed and fractured one of Rountree's ribs, knocking him down. His side was burning with pain. He found himself lying in the dust, trying to turn over and get up, when he felt two arms around his neck.

Sally's face was just above his, and there was a great fear in her eyes. She kept asking him how badly he was hurt. His eyes were focused on the two tiny tears that had formed and were threatening to drop on his face, and he wished that they would.

A crowd was gathering around now, thick, and all were talking at once. "He must have been crazy," a man was saying, and Rountree looked up and saw the mousy hotel clerk basking in the glory of the importance of his news. "I heard the shot, and I rushed to Mr. Seeger's office.

The door was open, and Mr. Seeger was lying dead with his face across his desk and blood all over his white shirt.

"There wasn't no smoke smell in the room," the little man babbled on. "I ran to the window, and I saw Horton shoving his gun into his holster and leading his horses away. He must have shot him through the window. And his own benefactor, too. Man's ingratitude—"

Mother Eaton and J. B. Meaders were pushing through the crowd. "Yuh say Horton killed Seeger before he came over here?"

"He did for a fact, shot him like a sneak in the night."

"Well, I'll declare," Mother Eaton said in a shocked tone. "Imagine that! Well, Meaders, get somebody from the store to come and get Horton away from my door. Some of you help Jess back into my kitchen, while somebody goes for the doctor. Sally, turn him loose long enough for us to get him up."

They got Rountree onto the cot in the lean-to back of the kitchen. The doctor came and taped up a broken rib, and Rountree was all right, only his side would be paining him for a week or so.

The girl sat on Rountree's cot, and she put her head on his chest. It hurt Rountree's sore rib, but he would have had it broken again before he would have let her know that.

Meaders came back into the kitchen, took his derby off and hung it up, then sat down to finish his condensed-milk lemon pie. His chair happened to face the open door to the lean-to. Mother Eaton studied this arrangement, and said, "Meaders, go out to one of the front tables to finish your pie."

"I'll be through with it in a minute," he objected.

"Meaders," she said sternly, "I said go out front to finish your pie. I don't allow customers in the kitchen." She took his hat off the hook and put it on his head.

He looked at her strangely, and said, "I'd shore like to know certain things. It's a puzzle to me how Horton happened to beat Seeger to the draw, but lost out to Rountree. You'd think it was all framed to work out that way."

"Being nosy never does any good," she snapped. "Never question fate."

"Still, I don't understand you. You're generally so soft-hearted—"

"That's because you've never been a mother," she snapped. "Get out so those kids can be alone."

And then they were alone, the boy and the girl, and she brought her lips down to his, and in them he found the things that filled the emptiness which had been in him for the last long years. In the warm hunger of that kiss was her promise that all that she was belonged to him, and the demand that all that he was should be hers.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HOWDY, rannies an' gals! How's yore range savvy? Try answerin' these five questions about the West and see how yuh stack up. If yuh can answer all five of them plumb correct that makes yuh a real expert. The answers are on page 97 if you are aiming to take a peek—but try to answer 'em yore ownself first. And let us know how yuh made out!

1. When and where was a good horse once worth more than a small ranch?
2. "Be sure you're right, then go ahead." Who said these famous words?
3. Who said: "Their fate shall be my fate, their fortune my fortune, their destiny my destiny. As of old, I am with my country."
4. When may a cowboy's hat save his life on the range?
5. What is a *serape* and why was it usually part of a Mexican vaquero's equipment?

NORTH OF YUMA

or, Ready-Made Treasure for the Finding!

THE Southwest is a strange land of drifting sand and lonely mountains, of giant rocks and high-walled canyons, of cactus and burning heat. It is also a land of gold and hidden treasure.

Not all the Southwest, of course, is desolate desert. There are rich irrigated farming areas, stretches of grass and water and cattle ranches. There are thriving, modern cities too. But it often seems that the places where gold has been sought and found—and sometimes lost again—are the most barren and forbidding in the entire sun-parched desert.

Perhaps that is as it should be. Nature never intended the finding of a fortune in virgin gold to be easy. Prospecting is not the sluggard's way to quick riches. It is a game for pioneers, for adventurous, hardy men willing to risk their chances

The Mexican girl was trapped in a sandstorm

The Story of the Cowboy Mine—One of a Series of True Stories of Lost Mines of the West!

John A. Thompson

The Eternal Quest for Hidden Gold

EVER SINCE the world was just a button the search for golden treasure and lost mines has lured the venturesome. Our early West, bonanza rich in mineral wealth, has produced its share of lost mine stories, stories which are told in this series of articles.

In time these legends will become an authentic part of our Western folklore, like the age-old tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece.

Naturally details vary. Different versions have cropped up with re-telling and the passing of the years. But the stories are all founded on historic fact, on a life-size skeleton of solid truth. And hunting such hidden treasures affords an exciting twist to the perennial quest for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The gold *is* there. The problem is properly to locate the rainbow.—*J.A.T.*

of success in the world's far places.

The desert Southwest—Alaska—Northern Canada. The untamed mountain country of California, Colorado, Idaho. All these have been the scenes of spectacular bonanza strikes of millions of dollars' worth of the yellow metal. All have at least one thing in common. They are, or were, hard-to-reach wilderness country.

Yuma lies down in the southwest corner of Arizona. And north of Yuma the empty desert stretches out in a vast expanse of sand. It extends west across the ribbon of the Colorado river deep into southern California and east almost to the back door of Phoenix. It is gigantic, hot, dry and awe-inspiring.

Roads and trails across this enormous sun-parched waste were few, a hundred years ago. Save for two main east-west highways, paved for the motor travel that has supplanted frontier wagon trains, the situation is pretty much the same today.

Somewhere in the desert north of Yuma is a ready-made treasure in golden nuggets—the Lost Cowboy mine. How rich this windblasted, sand-scoured deposit of placer gold may prove to be, nobody actually knows. Your guess is just as good as mine.

The deposit has never been worked. It is virgin ground. The sort of stuff that caused the early day stampedes to California a hundred years ago or the rushes to the succeeding bonanza gold camps that did so much to build up the pioneer West.

At least two, and probably three, individuals have stumbled on the site of this amazing desert treasure at different times. Each of them brought back a load of golden nuggets, hand-picked from the surface sand in which they lay. They were gathered with the same ease as picking up pebbles from a beach.

And not a one of those who brought back the golden nuggets was ever able to return to the precise spot where the treasure had first been found—or to direct others to it.

Introducing Chloride Pete Wilson

The enigma has become one of the strangest legends of the desert. It remains one of the many unsolved mysteries that mark the mining history of the Southwest. You can believe it or not, as you wish. Parts of it sound like a fairy tale. But no matter how thinly based, there is a gossamer web of truth behind all folklore. And true or not, the fact remains that serious-minded men have spent time and money, endured desert hardship and even lost their lives in the futile search for the Lost Cowboy mine.

For myself I first heard about the Lost

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Cowboy mine a long time ago. I got the story—or at least one version of it—straight from the feedbox from the lips of a white-whiskered, sun-shrivelled old desert rat out in Arizona.

Pete Wilson—his friends called him Chloride—was 82 when I met him. He promptly informed me—just for the record, I guess—that he had never been sick a day in his life, and he considered the desert the healthiest place in the country.

Our meeting was fortuitous. I happened to be driving east from Needles, California, in the comparative cool of the early morning. In those days, Route 66 between Needles and Flagstaff, Arizona, was just a washboardy, gravelled road. I had cleared the little village of Topock on the Arizona side of the bridge high across the Colorado river and made the long ascent up through the black rock foothills of the towering Black Mountains towards the old mining towns of Oatman and Gold Road—where the famous Tom Reed mine and other bonanza properties had produced millions in gold bullion during their heyday.

An abandoned, open front mine shed stood off to one side of the road. I pulled over to it to enjoy the shade under the tin-roofed portico while I let my wheezing, boiling old jaloppy cool off before the final climb to the summit of the mountain range.

I had thought the shed was empty; but when I entered there was a sudden rustle in the back. It wasn't rattlers. It was the gnomelike, unkempt figure of Pete Wilson scrambling hurriedly to his feet from his bedroll on the floor. Pete had been camping there overnight.

Though his feathers were a bit ruffled over the unannounced intrusion, the old prospector calmed down when he found I had no more legal right to the shelter of the shed than he did. We got to talking—about mines and mining, gold and copper and other metallic treasures of the desert country. We decided to pool our grub resources and have breakfast together.

Long before the meal was ready, cooked on the campfire we built just outside the shade of the shed, we were fast friends.

I forked the bacon and eggs onto two separate agateware plates, and started back to the shed to eat, away from the blazing heat of the mounting sun. Wilson stood a moment by the fire, gazing to the south, past the high west wall of the mountains and down along the seemingly endless cactus-studded foothills that lay below us. Then he picked up his plate and joined me.

"Pile of gold out there—somewhere's," he volunteered. "Nuggets. Laying right in the sand. If a fellow could find the Lost Cowboy mine he'd be rich as that feller Creases."

I guessed he meant—Croseus, the old-timer in ancient times who owned all that gold.

"The mine's there all right," Pete went on. "Somewhere between here and Yuma. But I figure closer up to this end. Mebbe between here and Quartzite, or a piece south of Quartzite."

Fabulous Wealth!

I tried to remember distances. Desert miles meant little or nothing to the old school of blanket and burro prospectors like Chloride. Yuma straight south across the desert was about two hundred miles away. Quartzite perhaps not quite a hundred.

"Made my own tries to find the mine," Chloride continued. "About forty years ago. Nothing come of it. But them nuggets the cowboy took out was real. He found them sometime in the 1860's when La Paz was booming and that desert mining camp was turning out millions in placer gold a year—and a killing 'fore breakfast every morning.

"The cowboy wasn't no rock hound. Just a hoss rider from over Texas way working for a frontier Arizona spread that had started up along the east side of the Colorado river. They were headquarters north of Yuma, several day's cattle drive. The cowboy never did know exactly where.

"Most of the outfit's business was selling Longhorn beef to the Army post at Yuma. Back from the river the range was so poor them longhorns would wander miles into the desert looking for a bit of forage. No fences them days. It was a real chore rounding up a scatterment of the half wild longhorns to start them on a drive down to Yuma."

Chloride left the shed to pour himself a final cup of coffee from the coffee pot. While he was out by the fire, he sloshed the dregs in the pot around a couple of times, then splashed them out on the desert. Then he picked up the frying pan, gave it a quick scouring with a handful of sand, knocked out the last adhering grains on a rock and came back.

"Clean enough," he announced triumphantly indicating the pot and skillet. "A fellow that's lived in the desert long as I have learns not to waste water washing cooking u-tensils. They say you gotta' eat a peck of dirt afore you die anyhow." Chloride chuckled in his long, bushy, tobacco-stained beard. "Guess I've eaten a bushel in my time."

"Getting back to them golden nuggets," the old man went on, "it seems this cowboy was chousing strays out of the foothills one day, and finds himself up against a yellow rock cliff. He dismounts to tighten his cinches, or something and spots two, three longhorns wandering down out of a nearby draw.

"Not wanting the stock to turn back up the canyon, he starts waving the animals on with his hat, and chunking rocks at their rumps. He notices some of the stones he picks up are extra heavy for their size. They have a yellow glint here and there with a sort of black coating over the yellow. But what mainly impresses the cowboy, is that because of their weight they fly swift and true when he pitches them at the stock.

"Stones like that, he figures, are handy. So after he gets the cattle clear of the draw and afore he mounts his horse again, he gathers up a bunch of the black-coated stones and stuffs his pockets with them. Durn fool! He had a bonanza gold discovery by the tail and didn't even know it."

Chloride pulled a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and gnawed himself off an after breakfast chew.

"Seems a short time later the spread folded up. No grass, too many Indian raids or something. And this cowboy packs all his belongings in his soogans including some of the black stones which he is keeping as souvenirs, and starts heading east for better ranch country and another job.

"Around Tucson, or mebbe some other place, he meets up with a prospector and they get to talking about desert gold, the prospector saying how heavy gold nuggets are. He is telling too, that next to their yellow color, that heaviness is one of the main ways of distinguishing placer gold in the field. Casual-like, the cowboy produces a couple of the heavy stones from the desert north of Yuma.

"Ten seconds later the prospector is slapping the cowboy on the back, half wild with excitement. He scratches the coating off a nugget showing the cowboy the soft, rich yellow gold beneath. All they have to do, the prospector tells the fellow, is hot-foot it back there and they will both be millionaires.

"Either the prospector is too eager, or he don't sound convincing enough. Anyhow, the cowboy says the whole proposition seems like a wild goose chase to him —and besides he isn't sure he could find the place again. In fact he don't think he could, one hunk of desert looking much the same as another to him. But he does give the prospector all the directions he can remember, wishes him luck and says he's welcome—if the stuff really is gold.

"It's gold all right. The prospector proves that the way there ain't no question about it. He cashes the couple of nuggets the cowboy gave him by selling them to a regular licensed gold buyer. Then he heads for Yuma and starts pushing north across the desert with his burro, a pick and shovel, a little grub and a keg of water."

The Angel of Faith

Wilson paused, waiting for the inevitable question.

"What happened?"

"That," answered the old man, "is something only the desert can answer. I wish I knew. So does everybody else that ever tried to track down the Lost Cowboy mine."

It seemed like the end of the story. And just another lost mine yarn. Most old-time desert rats have a favorite, incredibly rich lost mine they dream about and talk about. I figured the Lost Cowboy mine was Pete Wilson's. And in the constant retelling he had come to believe every word of it.

More to make conversation than any-

thing else, and probably because the reporter's instinct in me never quite died down, I turned to Chloride with a question.

"What was the cowboy's name?"

Chloride stared at me blankly. I asked if he knew the name of the prospector to whom the cowboy had shown the nuggets, if he knew what finally become of the cowboy. Chloride took a long time to answer. I felt like an older kid telling a younker there wasn't any Santa Claus—and yet not half sure there wasn't myself.

Finally Chloride replied, not looking at me but gazing out across the desert where his dream gold lay.

"That's the trouble with you story writers," he said. "You want names, and what a fellow looked like, and where he lived and all. Them's details that don't make no difference nor alter the facts. The main thing is the golden nuggets, the yellow cliff in the foothills somewheres north of Yuma. That mister, is where you'll find the gold. Not looking up some range rider's pedigree or his distant kinfolk."

The old man paused before he went on.

"Now if I had been pulling your leg, or telling a windy I could easy have said this cowboy's name was Hank Smith or Slim Jones or something and you'd have probably nodded your punkin head wisely and thought by grab this old jassack knows what he's talking about. He's even got the cowboy's name.

"Instead I only told what I know about the Lost Cowboy mine. If I or anybody else knew the whole story, the place where them nuggets was found would have been rediscovered and the entire rich deposit worked out long ago.

"Another thing, son. Unless you got faith, there ain't much use looking for a lost mine—or prospecting for a new one either."

A Lone Mexican Girl

Faith. A "hovering angel girt with golden wings" the poet Milton called it. I doubt if Chloride ever heard of Milton. Yet though centuries apart in point of time, the two were kindred spirits. The desert produces philosophers—as well as characters.

"Besides," went on the old man, suddenly coming back to the Lost Cowboy mine, "what you heard is just the beginning of them nuggets in the desert. Maybe twenty years after the cattle outfit the cowboy worked for quit, there was some Mexicans took up in what must have been the same general section. Land that won't raise beef will still feed goats. The Mexicans grazed goats out in the foothills back from the river and a young Mexican girl, just a kid hardly in her teens, was goatherd for one of the flocks.

"Ever see a sandstorm in the desert? The wind rises, lifting the sand in a whirling, stinging cloud of dust so thick it cuts off mountains and other landmarks like a dark, brown fog. The blazing sun gets blotted out until its just a round, red evil eye staring at you from an unseen sky.

"There's nothing much you can do but hang onto your belongings, and your burro if you've got one, seek some shelter and hunker down in it until the storm blows over. If you pick the wrong spot, the sand can bury you—deep. The wind shifts the desert sand dunes like playthings, building up a fifty foot hill where there weren't none before, or scraping down to bare rock a draw or canyon mouth, formerly blocked by mounds of sand.

"Well this Mexican girl gets trapped in a sandstorm. She tries to start the goats for home, but they're gone and scattered with the wind. Then she flips her skirt up over her head to protect her face from the cutting, knifeblade particles of flying grit. Bent over against the wind, and with only her petticoat whipping about her legs, she commences to run, hoping to reach the shelter of the ranch at which she lived.

"It's no go. The elements against a lone girl is no fair shake. The kid stumbles, she veers this way and that. A couple of times she falls down. It ain't till the blowing sand has got her almost buried she realizes that howling wind or no, she's just got to get up and keep battling.

"That girl never knew, and was never able to tell, how many hours she staggered along in the sandswept murk. All sense of direction was lost. Finally she come to what she guessed was a rock wall or foothill cliff of some sort. Sand was sweeping off the top of it like spume

from a storm-whipped ocean wave. But down at the base of the wall the force of the wind was lessened. Only eddies and back-washes of the main hurricane curled into it at intervals.

"The girl cowered against the wall as long as she could stand. Then she noticed the back currents of wind scooping away the sand in front of her. Instead of piling it up, they were scouring it out clear to the bare rocks of the desert floor. So the girl let herself slip to the ground, and sat there resting, leaning back against the cliff.

"For a time she stared in front of her, frightened of course but fascinated as she watched boulders and huge rocks that had been buried before being slowly uncovered as the wind cleared away the sand. It was like watching the tide go out and finding reefs that had been invisible before. After a while the girl fell asleep.

"The sun blotted out. The brown murk turned to black with nightfall. When the girl awoke she was in a strange place, a part of the desert she never remembered seeing before. Behind her was a low yellowish cliff. In front a stretch of bare, boulder-strewn desert hardpan. And on the desert floor, scattered here and there on the ground, were hundreds of black-coated stones, too heavy for the wind to blow away. Parts of the stones where there was no coating, or where the black coating had been worn off glinted yellow in the sun. The wind had died down."

Pete Wilson halted his narrative to comb his gnarled fingers through his unkempt beard.

"She found the nuggets?" I prompted.

Gleaming Nuggets

Wilson nodded. "Picked herself up a skirtful. She wasn't sure what they were. But she guessed they might be gold. The Mexicans down at the goat ranch were always talking about the Lost Cowboy mine.

"Trouble was the half-famished girl had no idea where she was. She started walking out into the desert, headed west as she figured by the rough position of the sun. Her hope was that eventually she would come to the Colorado river. She zig-zagged, plowing through the deep, loose sand of fresh dunes. It was hard going."

I started to say something about the weight of a skirtful of gold nuggets. Twenty pounds at least. A heavy load for a young girl under her circumstances.

Wilson held up his hand.

"Now hold on," he said. "Let me tell it my own way. You can have your say and ask your questions later—

"About the time the girl figured she couldn't push herself a step further she spotted a thin plume of smoke cutting over the sand in the distance far to the north. The railroad! Probably the Santa Fe which crosses the Colorado river over the bridge at Topock and goes on up to Needles.

"Anyhow the girl changed her course and headed in the direction she had seen the feather of smoke. She trudged on a while, then rested. She didn't remember how long she kept travelling. But she must have slept at least one night in the desert, for she recalled as darkness fell, she marked an arrow in the sand showing the direction she must follow in the morning before she lay down to sleep.

"For water—since the original supply she had carried with her had been long since exhausted—she cut the tops off *viznagas* or barrel cactus. She even tried eating some of the warm, sweetish juicy pulp.

"Finally she reached the tracks—twin ribbons of sun-blistered, shining steel stretching out to infinity against the desert glare. You know the custom—in fact I think it's Arizona law. A train has got to stop and pick up anyone stranded in the desert. Well, a train bound for Needles picked her up.

"The crew like to have went hog-wild when they saw the nuggets she was carrying. Though she had only a few left because, as she explained, the original load was too heavy and she had kept lightening it on her wanderings through the desert, the crew was all for quitting railroading. They wanted to go mining then and there—if the girl would take them back to the place where she had made her find.

The girl just shook her head. All she could remember for sure was the direction she had travelled to reach the tracks—north. Or mostly north. It may have been northeast, or northwest, or any compass point in between. She didn't know. But she was certain from the

stories she had heard around the goat ranch, that somehow in the height of the awful sandstorm she had come upon the site of the Lost Cowboy mine. A lot of miners, prospectors and desert rats around Needles seemed to think so too when they heard the story. For a while there was a regular stampede into the desert on the Arizona side of the Colorado south of the railroad tracks from Topock, back from the river and down along and past the Chemehuevis range."

Sandstorms Play Tricks

"Gold has been found in the Chemehuevis mountains by the way," Chloride added after a pause. "But nobody ever did find the nugget-strewn stretch of desert floor that marks the riches of the Lost Cowboy mine. There's even some say the Lost Cowboy and the Mexican girl's find is separate lost mines, claiming their probable locations are too far apart for them to be one and the same."

Pete Wilson shrugged his bony, hunched-over shoulders. It was getting late—and in the morning—and hot. High time I got the old jaloppy creaking up the mountains and down the other side on the long haul towards Flagstaff.

"What do you think?" I asked.

Wilson looked at me shrewdly. "You just asking? Or do you really want to know?"

I wanted to know, and I told him so.

"They're the same," said Chloride, "according to my way of figuring. Gold is queer stuff and Nature has played a lot of strange stunts regarding where it is and where it ain't. But it's kind of like what they used to say about lightning in one way. It ain't apt to strike twice so rich and so similar in the same place.

"What's more, I think them sandstorms is the answer. What they uncover one time, they may cover up the next—and vice versa."

Pete Wilson, known as old Chloride, asked for a lift to the crest of the mountains. I gladly gave it to him. But all the way up the long, twisting climb he said not another word about the Lost Cowboy mine.

"Spite of the Tom Reed and all the millions its produced, there's more metal in these hill than's ever been mined out of them, or ever will be," announced the old man as I let him and his meager belongings out of the car at the top of the ridge. "Thanks for the ride, son. And mighty glad to have met you."

That was all. It was the only time I ever met Chloride Wilson. I thought about him a lot. But it was quite a while before I got around to checking on the Lost Cowboy mine. When I did, I discovered that Wilson was far from being the only one who believed in the story of the lost treasure in nuggets that lies out in the empty desert somewhere north of Yuma.

A lot of other prospectors and desert mining men believed in it too. It has become part of the lost mine legends of the Southwest in spite of the indefiniteness of many of the story's details.

Some accounts give the cowboy's discovery and the Mexican girl's find as two different lost mines, just as Wilson had said. And some of the details vary importantly. One version has the cowboy simply riding through or across the desert, reason not given, and jogging slap bang into the golden treasure. He got lost, his horse died, he wandered around to the point of delirium, finally found a water-hole and at last made his way back to civilization minus, or with only a few of the nuggets he had tried to carry out.

Another account mentions the ranch the cowboy worked for but adds the remnants of a 'dobe corral as a landmark of the old spread. The corral is said to be somewhere out in the desert and it was this enclosure into which the gathers of strays were rounded up before being driven down to Yuma to market. The cowboy is supposed to have chunked some of the nuggets he didn't know were gold at the stock penned in the corral.

On the other hand the story of the Mexican girl guarding her goats and caught in the sandstorm runs pretty true to form in all the versions I ever heard, or heard of. And they are substantially the same as the one told me by Chloride Wilson.

Search for Wasteland Fortune

Perhaps these are only details after all. In the last analysis, as Wilson so sharply put it, the place to find desert gold, hidden or unhidden, is in the desert

where it lies. Not in the archives of a forgotten day, or musty records and the yellowed pages of ancient newspapers. The only gold there is the possible chance of unearthing a new clue that may lead to the treasure, or of reading a new meaning into the old ones that have been already tried, and found wanting.

That applies of course to all the lost mine legends of the West, to all the stories of buried gold and hidden hoards of bullion. And it is something worth remembering, if you ever decide to look for a lost mine yourself.

Now we come to what may have another strange chapter in the bizarre mystery of the Lost Cowboy mine. Along about the turn of the 20th Century, it seems that a mining man boarded an eastbound Santa Fe train at Needles. To passengers and the conductor he confided that he had just come in from a long trip in the desert. He didn't say where, except that he had been on the Arizona side of the Colorado, and south of Topock. It was, he insisted, rich mining country, much of it still untapped and unexplored.

As the trip progressed he became more expansive. He said he was making a quick trip East to settle some business. Then he was coming back to work the mine he had discovered. To prove he wasn't kidding about the mine he showed his listeners several thousand dollars worth of coarse gold nuggets. Naturally he never disclosed the location of his discovery. Nor did he make any references to the Lost Cowboy mine. The deposit was fabulously rich, he claimed, and near a yellow rock formation or hill of hard-packed yellow clay.

If this was all there was to it, if the story had simply ended there with the man riding off on the train and never showing up again, the coincidence would hardly be worth mentioning. But this fellow came back to Needles, with another man as his companion or partner. Both of them were outfitted for a desert trip and they had enough grub along to last them for several weeks in the sand.

It looked like an auspicious start. The man who had brought out the nuggets seemingly knew exactly where he was going once he got into the desert. But he managed to parry all leading questions regarding his destination. He and his companion left town secretly at night by a circuitous route intended to shake off any chance followers. It did. No one picked up their trail.

Mining men in Needles, once over their initial disappointment at not being able to start a new desert gold rush, began speculating on when the pair would return and how much gold they would bring back. The cracker-barrel estimates ran all the way from reasonable thousands of dollars' worth to fantastic millions. The only thing everyone agreed on was that the desert was rich—if you knew where to find the gold.

After a few days someone brought up another topic to take the spotlight. By the end of the month the pair that had headed into the desert had not returned, and had been all but forgotten.

More weeks passed. Once more the pair were in the local limelight. But this time it was because folks in town were beginning to wonder what had happened to them and why they hadn't come back.

The desert is treacherous. It can be fast friend to desert rats or old prospectors like Chloride Wilson who treat it cautiously and take no chances. On occasion it can even reward such men handsomely from its store of widely scattered mineral treasure. But the hombre who merely laughs its dangers off and gets careless is in for trouble.

Tragedy of the Desert

Here and there throughout the sand buried deep one day, exposed to the blazing sun the next, are the whitened bones of those who have laughed at the desert's hardships. Even in these modern times and days of venturesome auto argonauts, there is not a summer passes without newspapers in the Southwest carrying at some time or another the tragic headlines of what has happened to tenderfeet who wandered off too far from water, or became too heedless of the desert's noonday heat.

Sometimes the authorities, or experienced desert men reach the lost in time to save their lives. But all too often the stories end on the somber note of funeral plans for the victims.

Back at Needles when the pair of gold-seekers, off for another load of nuggets

from their mine, failed to show up long past the expected time, someone finally notified the authorities on the Arizona side of the river. As has been done many times before and since a search party was organized. Long, wide miles of the empty desert country were combed for any trace of the missing pair. The searching party returned without finding a sign of men, or mine, or nuggets.

Maybe the pair had gone on south and come out down at Yuma. Enquiries at that town revealed that as far as was known, no such duo of miners had come through or into the city recently.

Another search party was organized, this time in Needles. The services of an expert Indian tracker were engaged. Eventually he located the remnants of what appeared to be the pair's desert camp the first night out. Once on the trail he stuck to it like a bloodhound.

Though the rest of the searchers once more returned to Needles, the tracker remained in the desert. Then one day he too came back, haggard, tired, his face grim. He reported he had found the pair—dead.

Near the bodies, half buried by the drifting sand were the remains of their burros. But there was no sack of gold nuggets, no baggage of any kind. The men, the tracker said, had been shot. So had their animals.

Who killed them? The Indian didn't know. That wasn't part of his job, he declared. He had only been hired to find the missing men. And he had.

Thus a tragic finis was written to what may have been another episode in the mystery of the Lost Cowboy mine.

Though many trips have been made into the region since, no one else, so far as is known, has ever brought back any more of the precious, black-coated nuggets of virgin gold. Nor is it at all certain whether or not the rich deposit the man who boarded the train at Needles discovered, was the same as that found by the cowboy or the one encountered by the Mexican girl. Pete Wilson never mentioned the pair from Needles.

There may be but one lost mine in the desert north of Yuma and south of Topock —or three. Maybe two. But it was the cowboy's original find eighty years ago that started the legend. And when or if that desert deposit of golden nuggets is ever located again, the chances are it holds a hard-won fortune awaiting its lucky finder.

THE LITTLE EXTRAS

(Concluded from page 57)

"Why didn't you?"

For some reason he couldn't analyze, Sam was sizzling. Yet his voice was quiet as he asked significantly, "You wouldn't mind doing some of the 'little extras' for her, Kirk?"

"Not for her! But as for the rest of these moochers along this route—All those 'little extras' for which you don't get paid will be cut off just like that." Hibbens snapped his fingers.

Sam twisted sideward to size up the fellow once again, and this time he made no effort to convince himself that he liked what he saw. Something had clicked in his mind, and it was pretty amazing. All at once he knew that today's trip and his attempts to sell Hibbens on this stage route had backfired. And with a wallop!

Actually there was neither sameness nor monotony about these trips. But gee-willikers, until today he had been taking his enjoyable day-by-day experiences for granted. Only now did he clearly realize that he had grown into the lives of these people he served as they had grown into his. What if he was old and stove up and filled with rheumatic aches? As long as the Almighty gave him strength to drive this stage, he was going to drive it! This was where he belonged!

"The deal's off, Kirk."

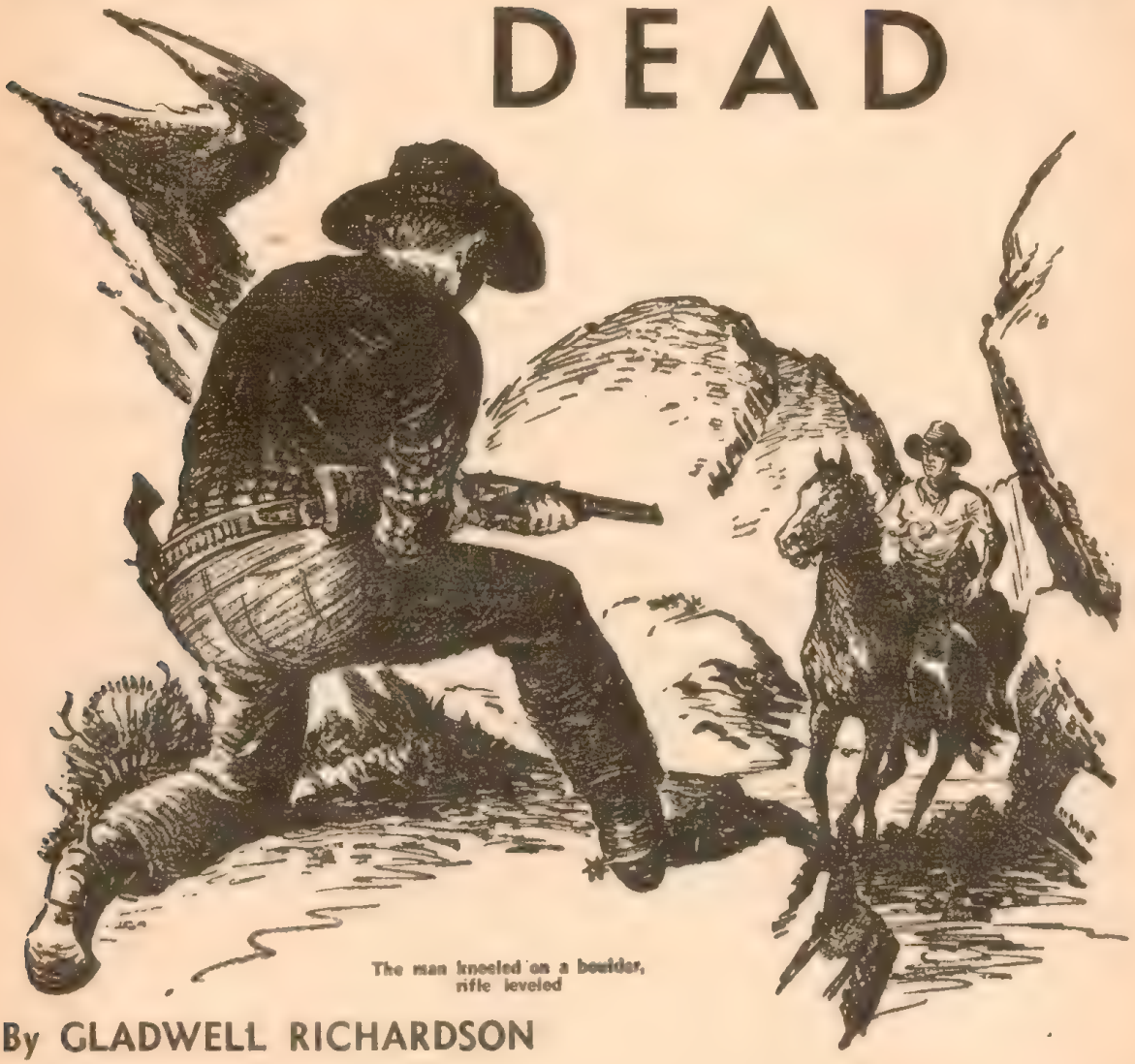
"What?" Hibbens was startled out of his heavy stolidity. "Look here, old-timer, you said yesterday you were crazy to get rid of yore stage. You've talked sale all day long, too. Well, I want this outfit and I'll buy it!"

"No soap, Kirk!" Sam smiled at his plodding team. There was a great warmth in his old eyes, and in his heart a deep sense of contentment.

"Confound it, man!" Hibbens exploded. "What made you change yore mind?"

"The little extras!"

Shoot the Man DEAD



The man kneeled on a boulder, rifle leveled

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

NOTHING about the gloomy little town of Santel appealed to Sam Wickett when he rode in from the Texas line at sundown. This was his first opportunity to stop and rest, and for that reason New Mexico offered brief haven. But seated in the lunch room with a sheriff and his deputy watching, he debated the wisdom of having halted this soon.

As he began a second cup of coffee the chunky, scar-faced sheriff, dropped onto the stool next to him, while the deputy raised a chill by standing at his back.

"Texan, huh?" drawled the sheriff, fishing out a chewed plug of tobacco.

Sam gave him a bleak, blue-eyed glance, turning his head afterwards to stare at the sad-faced deputy.

An outlaw with a price on his head, Sam Wickett risks his own neck to clear the name of the man he's sent to kill

"Yeah, quite a few of us drop over into New Mexico," Sam observed pointedly.

The sheriff smiled thinly. "Check. I been here a long time. Well, only reason you ain't havin' immediate trouble with us is, yore hair is coal black!"

Both officers thought the sally amusing, chuckling deeply. Yet behind the tightness of their expressions, the set of their crowfooted eyes, both were worried. A red-headed, lone road agent had been running rings around them for a solid month. He hit regularly twice a week, making a haul and vanishing afterwards. People around Santel swore the bandit was undoubtedly a man who lived near, or had, because his familiarity with the country, created his success in evading capture. Having learned these facts from the man where he left his horse, Sam did not consider the sheriff's talk either humorous or aimless. He moved his wide shoulders and glanced at the deputy a second time.

"Yuh're making him skittery standing behind him," the sheriff said laconically. "Such an uneasy feller couldn't of come from nowheres else but the feudin' part of Texas where the Nelson-Lannahan outfits hang out. It's claimed they killed a hundred men during it, ninety-eight of them shot in the back. Haw, haw!"

The two passed out into the now dark street still laughing. Sam kept his face straight without effort. The Nelson-Lannahan feud had been a part of hell. He should know, having worked with the Nelson faction. When the dust settled, people on the sidelines who lost during it swore to a bale of warrants for good men of both factions. Which side was wrong didn't matter. Bystanders wanted vengeance, so now a good many men like Sam carried a price on their heads.

Rising to his feet he paid his bill, and on the street turned off the end of the sidewalk against the front of the bank. New Mexico towns might be constructed of wood, adobe or even tar paper, but always the bank would be a solid mass of stone. From the front of this one as he gained the lower corner stepped the sheriff and his deputy behind drawn guns.

"Stick 'em up, Wickett!" the sheriff ordered. "We know who you be."

Sam's hands went only to the square corners of his shoulders. "How come," he said. "You guessing?"

"No. Them Texas sheriffs knows so many of you fellers jump this way they don't delay sending notices ahead."

"You're from Texas," Sam went on tersely. "You know how often there's no real cause for arrestin' a man on them feudin' sheriff's warrants. None from where I hail. You know I'm hardly guilty and I wouldn't last long enough to get into a court of justice if you sent me back."

"Correct, I reckon. But there's still a warrant for Sam Wickett!"

THE officers were evidently wary of him. He possessed the reputation of being a hard case. Yet since he seemed to accept the situation, the deputy moved close in order to reach his holstered gun.

The sheriff cried warning too late. Lunging fast, Sam struck the deputy with the full force of his shoulders, driving him into the sheriff in a flash and hurtling both to the ground. The deputy lost his gun in falling. Sam kicked the weapon from the addled sheriff as that worthy tried to rise.

Sam whisked around the corner into the alley, hearing their wild scramble seeking guns in the dark. At the center of the bank wall, Sam came to a halt. Bright moonlight shone in the far end. He would never make it in time. Reluctantly he turned around. He would have to fight his way out. Likely that meant killing an officer which he did not want to do.

"Stand put," a chilly voice ordered behind him. "Get in here quickly before they see you!"

That placed a slightly different meaning on the command of the man with the drop. Sam obeyed with alacrity, seeing then the wide open door into the bank. He ducked past the man, who quickly and soundlessly closed the door, barring it solidly.

Noise and voices arose immediately in the alley. The man in the gloom of the bank spoke. "Go on through the hall to the door you see the light around." Sam suspected he held a leveled gun, seeing it only when he entered the lighted room.

While Sam stood against the near wall, the man slipped the gun into a side coat pocket. He took a chair behind the polished desk, leaning elbows on the edge.

Deeply sunken, piteous eyes studied Sam at length. The wiry little man in the Prince Albert coat was at least sixty. A spade beard covered part of his face.

"I overheard them discussing you," the old man began finally. "You're Sam Wickett, heavy gunslinger for the Nelson crowd in the late Texas feud. As a matter of fact you're claimed to be Nelson's prize killer."

When he grew quiet Sam waited. He didn't like the killer business and the words brought a faint flush to his cheeks. The old man leaned back in his chair. In the dark door he had seemed firm, hard and resolute. Now he appeared to be completely broken up about something.

"You sided with Nelson?" he asked eventually. "That is true?"

Sam inclined his head. The old man had not saved him from a bad gun fight with the law without some excellent reason of his own.

"I knew Nelson many years ago," came then. "If you worked for him you would be a man of some ethics. One whose word could be depended upon, whatever else he might be."

Again that lengthy period of thoughtful pondering. Sam broke it with, "Go on, judge. I got lots of time while they try findin' me."

"I am not a judge. I am the banker here—E. L. Campbell. You are riding through, Wickett? Heading for another place where you can start over under a different name?"

"I'm still listenin'."

"Well, I can help you on your way. As you ride out you can do me a favor." He drew a wad of currency from a hip pocket and counted off an even thousand dollars. "You will be amply paid."

Sam's blue eyes narrowed. So emotionally upset was Campbell he failed to notice the sparks of fire in them. On the contrary he seemed to feel better once some decision known only to himself became definitely decided.

Suddenly, as though seeking some measure of sympathy, perhaps even justification, his eyes travelled to a large tintype hanging on the end wall near the desk. It was of a beautiful girl, around twenty years of age. Sam's eyes met Campbell's when he shifted around.

"A member of yore family?"

"My daughter, Rosalind, sir," he said gruffly. "Let's get on. You must travel tonight."

"Who do yuh want killed?"

CAMPBELL winced sharply, that hurt, yet his resolution remained.

"I read some doubt in you that you want the job," Campbell spoke briskly. "What is another dead man to one who has killed before?"

"You hate this man bad?"

"No," Campbell shook his head sadly, even with sorrow. "I have considered the matter at length. There is no other solution. God knows if there was any other possible way out, I would try it!

"For you this is a very simple and safe job." Campbell stood to his feet forking over the money which Sam took hesitantly. "You're riding north towards the San Mateo river? You'll find a mesa just south of it called Picket Wire.

"On top is a sheep camp and in it a young cowboy. He is sandy-haired. You can see red freckles on his face if he is shaved. Not quite your height. About five feet eight, I'd say. You will find no difficulty locating the camp. Ride in, do your work and keep on going. You are being paid in advance for that reason. Nothing of his death will be reported by the other man who is there."

He halted, watching Sam, his white face dead in the lamplight.

"So, I just ride around to all the sheep camps on this mesa and plug every young man of that description until I get the right one?" The nasty tone of his voice was lost on Campbell.

"There is only one sheep camp on Picket Wire. You can't miss it."

"Sometimes I kinda like to know why I'm killin' a man," Sam suggested sarcastically.

"You shouldn't have any scruples. This cowboy hiding out with a sheepherder is a criminal—a killer, sentenced to death anyway. A court said so. He is an outlaw with a price on his head. Even that does not interest me. What does is that this man has it within his power to bring disgrace and ruin to—others." He again glanced at the picture of his daughter. Sam could partly follow his thoughts, some of his painful reasoning. It left him slightly chilled.

"Yeah, you could have the right idea at that," he observed.

"Let us go," Campbell spoke crisply.

They passed through the front of the bank. Unlocking the door Campbell reconnoitered the street before Sam slipped to the outside.

"I will accompany you to your horse in case the sheriff is still looking for you. I am a man not without influence in Santel."

They strolled up the dark street, once passing a small group of conversing men who paid them no attention. One talked loudly, "Sam Wickett rolled through Santel. From what happened to Sheriff Kerr, guess he's as tough as folks always claimed!"

Not far from the feed lot, Sam let Campbell go on alone to engage the operator in conversation up front, while he got his horse in back, and slipped away. Free of Santel he rode west, not north. He had no intention of drygulching any man.

The money, he decided with some qualms, had been actually shoved into his hands. If he didn't take it the old man would likely proposition some other and worse gunslinger. A few hours hence, reaction would set in to cause Campbell to regret his act. When this man failed to be slain, perchance Campbell would find surcease from his deplorable state in some other way.

So, figuring he actually had done a good deed, Sam moved well into the west where he slept on his saddle the balance of the night. At dawn he struck into the north this time, for after all he needed to cross the San Mateo.

He came up a divide, a flat topped mesa showing to the eastward which he surmised to be Picket Wire. Arroyos and small streams pitched north from here to the river, which he recognized from bottomland timber marking its wandering course. Clouds hung in the high north too, and a smell of rain wafted on the air.

When he came to a short running stream, Sam halted and washed up thoroughly. Remounting, he crossed over the shallow water towards a mass of great standing rocks. As the bay gelding swung up from lower ground, its ears pointed. Sam, surprised, reined in, reaching for his gun when he saw the man kneeling on a boulder, a rifle leveled. His face was pinkish and sun-peeled. Red hair in untidy locks hung below his hat. The cherubic little man began to chortle.

That caused Sam to give him a closer look. He went even more on the alert for a fast draw, for this was "Red" Duff, a gunnie who had been on the Lannahan side of the feud a few months ago. Duff kept on laughing, the tears of mirth beading in his eyes.

"Dawg-goned! Sam, fancy meeting you in these parts."

ONLY then did Sam relax. Apparently Duff did not intend to carry on the former bitter hate for all Nelsonites. When he shifted the rifle, abruptly bending an inquiring look upon him, Sam rode up near.

"No argument now, Sam. Even if we did once waste a lot of lead at each other. When them Nelson's and Lannahan's kissed and made up sweet, it left rannies like us plumb in disgrace. I hear you got a reward on yore head too; like me!"

"Yuh're getting wanted worse," Sam answered gently. "Had my hair been red instead of black last night in Santel, the law would have blasted me to bits and asked questions later. Yuh shore got them mad as a hornet's nest."

Duff broke into paroxysms of new laughter. Sam watched unsmilingly until he quieted down. Duff was, of course, no less than the road agent.

"Me and my pard, Nelly, shore got old john-laws talkin' to their shadders," he bragged. "Have we been cleanin' up! Couple more stages and mebbe the bank in town and I'm retirin' to Santa Fe to blow myself to a good time."

"From what I hear you should have a stake already. Got a pardner and that fools them because they're lookin' for only one man, huh?"

"That's how it works. I come fogging west ahead of a hangman's noose, or a bullet, like you. Met up with a feller, Whitey Johnson. He's lived around Santel more than ten years. A high line rider. Snaky. Knows every trail, road, rock and hole in the whole blamed country. As a holdup man he flunks into a coward. Ain't got the sand it takes. That part is my job. Okay, too, for this Johnson can keep circulatin' around to case all my work. Because he knows the country so well he can

figger out every foot of my getaway. That scheme helps me escape the law. Got them all fooled. They ain't never come near us yet."

"Hmm, seems as though you do all the work, actually?"

"Not at all," Duff denied promptly. "I'm riding luck with a set-up like this. Whitey's luck! As I said, he ain't no holdup man worth a dern. Why, after all these years of learnin' the country and plannin' he tried to rob one measly little saddle shop in town last year. Got panicked. Lost his head like a fool, killed the saddler, and ran.

"But his luck, I been tellin' yuh about still held. The first customer in afterwards was some cowboy who was found standin' over the body, got charged with the murder and was sent to the pen to be hanged!" Duff considered that very amusing.

Sam blanched. It was worse than a dirty deal for an innocent man to be convicted and hanged for a crime he knew nothing about.

"Oh, the cowboy was lucky too, in a way," Duff vowed. "He broke out of the pen and is still loose. Mebbe he went to Mexico."

They talked awhile longer, Duff bragging more about his holdups before he arose to say, "Come on and forget the feudin' and eat with us. Like yuh to meet my dumb pard. Me and Whitey Johnson got a camp hid here in the rocks."

Sam shrugged his shoulders, dismounted and walked behind Duff while he wound around through the masses of stone, getting deeper, thence into a pocket where a temporary camp had been pitched. Sight of Sam brought a wiry, hairy faced man springing to his feet clawing iron in sudden fear until Duff cursed him to lay off.

"Didn't I tell yuh he's a spooky feller?" Duff ordered, and introduced them. "He's all right, Whitey. Else I wouldn't have brought him in. Us fought against each other in Texas. Now we both got a price on our heads for dead or alive. Only they erased them last two words on the dodgers!"

Johnson glowered continually, not talking much while Duff did most of the work getting the meal. Sam observed both carefully. He was always on guard for he wouldn't trust Duff too far and this Johnson never.

When he prepared to leave, Duff asked if Sam had anything particular in mind. Sam turned back from mounting the dun, considering the red headed outlaw thoughtfully.

"I've got a bid to put a feller away permanent."

For the first time Johnson came alive, an evil grin splitting his thick lips. Duff asked if it was anyone they knew, or that maybe Johnson did.

Sam shook his head. "Some sheepherder."

"Killing a sheepherder don't get nobody in bad with the law," Johnson broke out. "Had yore customer told us we'd done it for free!"

Apparently the killing job meant nothing to either. They had not been approached. Sam lifted into saddle. Duff told him a better trail led to the river over against Picket Wire mesa and he should take it.

A winding route got Sam towards the upper point of the mesa. The long threatening clouds covered the sky when he gained the trail. Soon, a shower of rain fell. Then it became a sprightly downpour as he headed on. Visibility became shortened to a few yards as haze resembling fog raised from the beat of cold rain on the hot, dry ground. Sam slowed, intending to unroll his slicker.

A blast of lightning and thunder broke. Behind it a river rose up dark against the storm on the trail ahead. It was Sheriff Kerr, who yelled, "I thought he'd come this way. Get him, boys!"

Because he expected more riders to appear with the sheriff, Sam lost any warning of danger close at hand. Half a dozen men were concealed on the sides of the trail in the unbroken terrace, had in fact spotted him before the sheriff.

The crack of gunfire gathered into the storm. Sam never got hand to his gun. The striking lead almost threw him out of saddle. His horse wheeled aside in fright, forcing him to grab the horn to hold on. A fresh rumble fetched down a sheet of rain that fortunately covered the scene momentarily.

SICK AND dazed, Sam spurred, riding with the windy thresh of rain into

the storm. When light started clearing between gusts he was over against the base of the mesa seeking concealment behind the towering hunks and great masses of broken stone. Blood ran from a wound in the left thigh into his boot. There was also a trickle, and much pain from a bullet hole through the shoulder on the same side.

The rain drew down once more, in big heavy drops this time. Wet, and semi-conscious he hunkered over in the saddle trying to keep from falling. Minutes elapsed during the continual downpour. This time it failed to let up. Through it riders splashed along the trail.

"What about tracks?" the sheriff yelled anxiously at men in front of him Sam could not see.

"Tracks in all this rain?" a rider shouted back derisively.

They squashed and slapped on beyond hearing. Sam fought to retain some consciousness. Before he could try for medical aid he must first lose his trail. That would have to be done while the rain fell in sufficient force to wipe out ground sign.

Resolutely he straightened up. The main trail for him could not be. He located a fault giving upward onto a shelf in the mesa wall. He tried it recklessly, not knowing what lay ahead. Higher up on the precarious footing, another pitched back in the opposite direction, in a rise that carried him all the way to the rim. The mesa top where he came out in knee high grass was studded with stands of juniper timber.

The nausea and blackness threatened again, yet by now he had created quite a gap in his back trail. He came fully conscious one time to find the dun seeking shelter in the timber. Sam forced on again, heading eastward. He awoke next when he hit the ground. The dun moved aside with dragging reins. Sam didn't care, was too far gone to worry any more. . . .

When he regained his senses the rain obviously had long ceased. Indeed, the sun hung very low in the western sky. He discovered himself lying on a tarp, his sore body bandaged. The unmistakable smell of sheep hung in the air, and from a nearby bed ground echoed the noise of a flock.

"He's come out of it, Miguel," a young voice said.

"*Si*," came in Spanish. Two men walked over. The younger was clean shaven, sandy haired and looked exactly as Campbell described him. Miguel stood short, heavy limbed, mustached, and dressed in heavy outdoor clothing like Sam remembered all the sheepherders he ever saw.

"How do you feel?" the cowboy asked. "You found me after the rain quit today?"

"Two days ago," Miguel spoke up, voice heavy with accent. His dark eyes turned to scrutinize the cowboy. Both stared with questions written deep in their apparent consternation.

Sam tried to thank them with inadequate words, and was told gruffly they had been glad to bring him in. An uneasiness hung over the camp, which became more noticeable as the days went on while Sam recuperated. Not once did they ask him pertinent questions, how he came to be there, or his probable business. Nor did he volunteer any such information. All too obviously he was on the "dodge" and the two men knew it.

MIGUEL was glum, inclined to deep moody spells and occasionally some form of worriment showed in his black eyes. However, Sam saw him only at night since he was out with the sheep during the daytime. The cowboy was gone a lot also, but he did spend a little time with Sam in camp. He was the man Sam had already been paid to shoot down.

When he found himself taking a liking to the cowboy, recollection brought a wry grin. The cowboy did not show any of the signs of being a wanton criminal, or for that matter, that he was other than the hard working, peaceful rider he looked to be. What Sam had been told about him just didn't bear out. Yet he knew from the furtiveness about both men, their constant watchful uneasiness, they expected trouble from any source.

In a week Sam could walk unaided. After three days more he decided he was able to risk riding on. To gain strength he had been taking walks in the timber, and was doing so the morning he decided to remove himself from the mesa, in order that he might get on across the river. He returned directly for camp to find the cow-

boy had a visitor.

It was a girl who wore a divided riding skirt, had a mass of curly golden hair and looked familiar to Sam as he came upon them unexpectedly. When he suddenly remembered the picture in Campbell's office a few more strange facts became clear.

"Rosalind, you've got to quit coming here," the cowboy protested in an agitated voice.

"I had to today, Guy. I've used everything in my power to win father over to aiding us in getting at the truth. To clear you. We must. It's our only hope." And a very poor one from the disheartened sound of her voice.

They observed Sam then, and turned to face him stiffly.

"Does the name Guy Howell mean anything to you?" the cowboy asked, and both waited anxiously.

"No," Sam shook his head, starting on past them, "and I'm not the kind asks questions. It's none of my business, whatever it is!"

"He's on the dodge too," the cowboy explained to the girl. "A wanted man." Empty mockery changed to seriousness in his voice. "Mister, you tell her that she's making a mistake coming to see me!"

Sam paused, half turning to say earnestly, "That's right, ma'am. It's not what would happen to him, but the burden for you to bear when it's discovered."

He went on to the bed ground. After a little while the cowboy escorted the girl to where her horse had been left in the timber, and she rode away.

This cowboy was Howell, convicted for a crime he didn't do. That night after supper he sat by himself for a long time, lost in deep contemplation of a miserable future. In the morning Sam saddled the dun, and gave both men his thanks for taking care of him. Howell talked fast to Miguel in Spanish.

The exchange threatened to lengthen, but Howell overrode the concerned older man's objections and went for his own horse. Joining Sam, they rode together across the mesa and down to the river trail. There Sam halted determinedly.

"Yuh're crazy to go along with me. If there's any kind of a chance for you yet, don't take up the hootowl trail."

"I've been sentenced to hang," Howell told him bitterly. "Broke out of the pen and now they're lookin' for me all over the Southwest. I came to fight back, with all the enthusiasm possible to somehow prove my innocence. Miguel was the only friend I knew would help conceal me while I tried. He got word to Rosalind.

"Then this red-headed road agent started to work. We're about the same size. To most scared witnesses my sandy hair would match up. Now I'm accused of being him also. I know I haven't any chance at all of proving myself clear on the murder charge, and likely never on this other. I know what those people down there will do to me if they ever get their hands on me."

Howell kept on talking, and as he listened Sam got the whole picture. The girl and Howell were engaged to be married when he was arrested, charged with killing the saddler. She had stuck by him loyally.

But her father felt the disgrace keenly, though he did console and help her during the awful days of the trial. That period was weathered, then came the break-out. When he discovered through her appeal for help to establish Howell's innocence that he was near, and suspected of being the road agent, Campbell feared the worst.

To the harassed banker, this sorry affair would drag his daughter into the mire. She was, moreover, criminally liable for assisting in keeping him in hiding. All this would account for the decision of the heartbroken old man to descend to extremes.

AFTER all, perhaps that was it. There Sam paused in sudden planning. He himself couldn't talk too much without exposing too much—much that might react to the detriment of Howell and the girl. Maybe the truth was actually impossible of proving.

There was only one chance in a hundred that Whitey Johnson could be taken, forced to confess the crime and placed safely in jail. Under the very critical circumstances there existed no excuse to raise false hopes in Howell. Considering also his own doubtful chances of survival, Sam nevertheless decided to try his hand. As far as he could safely and in his own way.

"You could be right," Sam told him.

"Before we go I got a chore to do and could stand yore help."

"Anything I can."

Sam headed around the west side of the mesa. Not until they reached the trail leading towards Santel did Howell object. For answer Sam pointed at the rocks, and turned into them. Short of the hidden camp he dismounted to scout forward afoot. The one chance he'd vainly hoped for ended in failure. Duff and Johnson had quit this pocket days ago.

Back on the trail Sam halted, meeting the suspicious, inquiring look of Howell.

"I seen the man who killed the saddler," Sam told him bluntly. "The last time I seen him he was in there. I knowed if we was lucky to find he was still there, we'd have to fight off his pardner to get him alive. Mebbe we wouldn't even be able to get him alive."

"What?" jerked hoarsely from Howell's lips. "You mean you know the real killer. Who—who are you?"

"I'm still a man on the dodge like you figgered me," Sam replied. "I ran into them two men before the sheriff's posse got me. I knew Duff before. He's the road agent. Now, risky as it is, if yuh'll play along, let's get down near Santel and look around until we locate them."

Howell kept staring as though he couldn't believe it. Sam talked briefly, explaining why he was on the dodge, about Duff admitting he robbed the stages around Santel and that his partner murdered the saddler in an attempted robbery.

"You got this one chance of us overhauling them," Sam insisted. "I'll stick by and take a chance myself, if you will. It's yore only hope the way I see it."

Hope had flooded through Howell, but in somber speculation of the risks it fell. He shook his head.

"Yuh've got everything to gain," Sam insisted. "Don't know why I'm takin' a hand in this, but I am. Yuh're going down there with me!" He said it harshly, and jerked his gun.

Howell's face whitened, but after consideration he nodded his head, and said, wondering, "I don't know why yuh're risking yore own neck. But I'll go." Holstering his gun, Sam rode southward with him. Howell lapsed into sullen silence. Sam watching the side of his face wondered if he might break suddenly and run.

It had been after noon when they came out of the pocket in the rocks. The afternoon wore on, and sunset came. The dusk gave way to night. When lights in Santel grew visible, Howell reined to a halt. The town gave him the creeps and he wanted to know if they dared approach this close.

"Shut up," hissed Sam, "and listen!"

GRADUALLY the beat of a running horse from the direction of Santel echoed on the air. A rider was fogging out of there like the devil was after him. Sam told Howell to take the west side of the trail while he went off to the other. A rising moon slanted some light into the worn trail and when the rider heaved up out of low ground along it, he was bent over, pounding his horse furiously with a quirt.

A low exclamation escaped Sam. He couldn't believe such good fortune, yet prepared to go into immediate action since the opportunity was presented. Calling that rider to a halt meant only to scare him aside, likely sending a cornered rat for a gun. He must be taken alive. Sam's rope came unfastened and he built a noose, resting easily until the rider dashed up even with him.

Sam cast it fast and over the target. The man jerked and fought to no use. He went out of the saddle, hitting the ground with stunning force. Howell dashed in to retrieve the running horse while Sam jumped to the ground and seized the prisoner. He was boosted back into his own saddle and roped there.

"You know this feller now?" Sam asked Howell.

"In past years. Whitey Johnson, he is. We used to call him Ridge Running Johnson, he liked to stay in the hills so well. This—the man should of been convicted in my place?"

"None other!"

Johnson stopped his painful swallowing to cry, "Wickett, yuh better lemme go! Red Duff was just brought in by the sheriff. The stage he tackled this afternoon was filled with deputies. This time they shot him full of holes!"

"Yore streak of luck has played out, Johnson," Sam told him without feeling. "We're taking yuh in!"

Howell was beside himself with re-

newed hope. However, he knew their scheme with Johnson would have to be handled carefully. This fact also bothered Sam, though he told Howell they would keep on playing their cards as they fell.

The town hummed with excitement when they gained the edge. People everywhere on the streets forced them to circle eastward. At Sam's request, Howell led them around and in behind Campbell's house. Johnson was taken down, his hands bound behind his back with a string from his own saddle. One final time he begged Sam to let him go lest they all get into trouble with the law.

"Take us in quietlike," Sam told Howell. "You just follow my lead and we'll see how it shapes up."

Because he knew the lay-out of the Campbell residence, Howell got them in through the kitchen and down the hall to the lighted living room. As they entered, Rosalind came up from a chair near the table lamp, crying in shock, "Guy! Guy!" and flew to him. Johnson gave Sam an accusing look only then discovering Howell's real identity.

Campbell stood up on the other side of the room looking grim of countenance. Sam took over before the storm should break from the embittered old man.

"Whitey Johnson killed the saddler. What we need to do is get the sheriff here alone, and unknown to others while we make this buzzard talk."

"The evidence at Howell's trial was too conclusive," Campbell retorted.

"Yeah? Like the sheriff, yuh'd already convicted Howell in yore own mind he was the road agent. Yet tonight the real one is in jail. Better be not so certain, Mr. Campbell. Just give us a hand to finish this off, please."

"Of course Guy isn't guilty of that crime, father," Rosalind pleaded.

The way Sam explained it, all Campbell had to do was get the sheriff quietly and bring him to the house. They would give him Johnson, and make a deal for Howell. Though he didn't mention it, naturally Sam expected to be afforded the opportunity to fade fast.

Finally Campbell said he would go for the sheriff, and getting his hat, left. Uncertain of how the old man might react once away, Sam moved to the front win-

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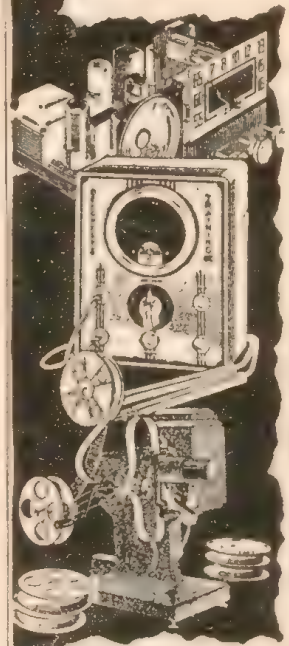

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dow through which he could observe the street leading downtown. However, after a while he saw the two men approaching, walking along together from the far corner.

Sam turned around to face the room. Campbell and Sheriff Kerr walked into the room. Simultaneously the window glass behind Sam broke as three rifle muzzles slammed through.

FROM then on events moved swiftly. Sam and Howell were disarmed. The deputies who had sneaked up beforehand, entered the house to take over the prisoners personally.

"I asked Duff after Mr. Campbell told me you claimed Johnson killed the saddler," the sheriff said. "Duff swears he never heard of him!"

"Why do yuh leave me still tied up?" Whitey Johnson asked hopefully.

"On general principles," the sheriff retorted. He collected his men and prisoners. As he marched out Sam saw the stricken girl crying on her father's shoulder. Campbell appeared badly misused.

Taken through the front office and into the cell corridor, Sam halted automatically when he saw Duff standing on one leg before the barred door of his cell. His right was wrapped with bandages from ankle to hip, and his left arm hung in a sling. Duff kept scowling at Sam.

"Gotcha, huh?" he ground out.

The sheriff returned after having put Johnson in a back cell, and Howell in the one across from Duff. Now he unlocked Duff's cell door, motioning at Sam to enter.

"Why didn't yuh tell me it was Wickett wanting to know about Whitey Johnson killing the man in the saddle shop last year?" Duff spoke up. "I'd have told yuh so. He's bragged to me a hundred times how he sluffed that job off onto somebody else."

Locking the cell behind Sam, the sheriff stood aside in the faint light from the office.

"Yuh'd swear to such in court?"

"If I don't get sent back to Texas, and can plead guilty on them robbery charges here."

The sheriff went to the office, got several men and then spent a long time with

Johnson. The mutter of voices echoed indistinctly towards the front. Across the corridor, Howell paced his cell restlessly.

Some time later, the sheriff and his party returned to the front office. Ten minutes later they took Howell there. It was a deputy who released Sam. Duff hobbled towards the closing door on his good leg. Surprisingly his usual good humor returned. He could laugh again, and did so.

"Sheriff Kerr says it's a deal with you," the deputy told him.

"Ha!" Duff exclaimed. "Figgered Johnson would confess. He ain't got no spunk and never did have. Hey, Sam," he lifted his voice, "be careful they don't decorate yore neck with a piece of hemp!"

The office was crowded. Howell stood against the far wall, one arm around the girl who shone tear bright with happiness. Howell continued looking incredulous, hardly daring to believe it had all happened so swiftly. Sam observed Campbell watching him from the instant he came into the room.

The sheriff stopped him beside the big desk.

"On yore way elsewhere, yuh might as well pick up yore gun, Wickett." He handed it to the surprised Sam.

But he stuck it into the holster, nodding his head and fighting back any indication of his curious bewilderment. The sheriff grinned hugely.

"Johnson's confession fixes everything," he explained. "We'll get it all straightened out with the governor. Me, I ain't mad at you for being kicked."

Sam felt glad over the way it turned out. For himself, too, for the return of his gun meant a passport elsewhere. The sheriff surmised his thought there.

"I got to thinking yuh're right about them feudin' Texas warrants," he said. "Kind of agree with yuh. At least for now. Since Mr. Campbell tells us he hired you especially to work on this case."

Sam hid his surprise, yet that could only be Campbell's way to get himself loose from a determination made at a time when the man must have been at his wits' end. He'd gone further, and fronted for Sam. Campbell pushed through Howell and the girl who hastened to thank

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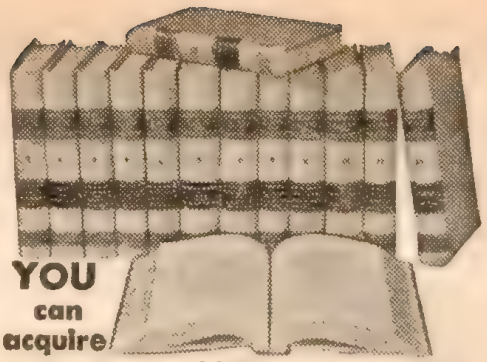

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Sam. Their eyes met and Sam saw that Campbell looked ten years younger with the great burden lifted. He held out his hand, at the same time his eyes pleading for understanding.

Sam took the hand, nodded his head. Then he remembered actually he had not done much to be paid so handsomely. He reached for the money in his pocket only to have Campbell stop his arm.

"You earned it, every cent," he said in a choked voice. "For which I'll be ever eternally grateful."

Sam went out through the door into the street, hearing the rush of talk break out afresh behind his back. He did not care what they were discussing. Before him lay another trail to ride, though not so hurried this time.

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 8)

The fleet footed mustangs extendin' theirselves to the fullest ounce o' their strength, tearin' across mountains and up and down arroyos, kickin' up the dust, their tails and heads high, their hoofs clatterin', and overhead, an airplane roarin' as it swooped down, rose circlin', and swooped down again and again.

Behind the wild mustangs the sixty cowboys were strung out in hot pursuit, never gettin' close enough to get their ropes on the mustangs.

Yep, Pete, it's wild, adventurous ridin', all right, but there's not much of a livin' in it, even for the hardiest, most experienced cowboy. You've sure got to savvy a lot of things, son. Learnin' how to get yore rope on a bronc is only one phase of the game, and throwin' a lasso ain't so durned easy; takes time and a lot of practice to get to be expert.

Buckin' Horses

It's sure true what rodeo performers tell you about the range bronc's buckin'. The buckin' horse of the rodeo is not as tough as the range bronc with a mean temper. The range animal may shy off from a jackrabbit while out in the open, and immediately start buckin', but the rodeo-trained bucker knows his job. He'll start buckin' when he's rode into the arena, and often stop soon after the signal gun (signifyin' the ride is over) has been fired.

The rodeo-trained animal knows not to buck against the sides of the arena or fall, while the range animal often cripples a rider for life when he takes a spill in a dog-hole, a pile of brush, or a ditch, or maybe against a rock.

Some wild range animals are just naturally mean. They'll paw and kick when a rider tries to mount. They'll sometimes paw and kick a rider what's been thrown. The rodeo horse, on the other hand, knows that when the pick-up man comes along-side, the rider will soon be off his back.

Rodeo Pick-Up Men

I reckon right here's a good spot to answer this inquiry from Johnny Hodges o' Albany, New York on the subject o' rodeos and pick-up men. Johnny wants to know what a pick-up man is, and what he does in a rodeo.

Well, Johnny, the pick-up man in a rodeo is just what the term implies—he "picks up" the rider from off his buckin' horse when the signal gun is fired. There are usually two pick-up men workin' together. The two riders close in on the bucker and one reaches for the halter while the other lifts the rider off.

Pick-up men, incidentally, have to be good riders and have cool heads. Sometimes a

[*Turn page*]

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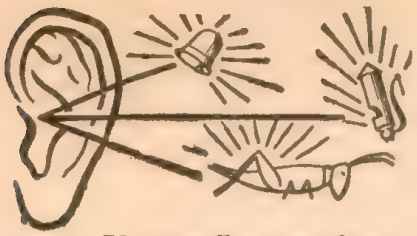

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bronc will buck into a pick-up man's horse, bruisin' his legs or body. The experienced pick-up man watches for such tricks when he closes in on a bucker.

Breakin' the Broncs

Yessuh, practically every ranch of any size has its bronc riders. These cowboys have the job o' breakin' the broncs and makin' trained cow ponies out o' buckers. There's different methods. Many good bronc riders catch up a horse the afternoon before he wants to ride him, puts a hackamore on him, ties up one hind foot so he can't kick, and lets the bronc get used to his presence. He may even put a saddle on him and let him get the feel of it. That night he stakes him out to a log on a 20-foot rope and the horse, in movin' around at night with the hackamore rubbin' back and forth across his nose, gets a sore nose.

Then when the rider tries the bronc out the next day he's able to "rein" him because of the tenderness of his nose. Some time later he puts a bridle on him, later a bit, and finally he uses reins on the bridle. A good bronc rider on a ranch uses a much gentler, more patient method than the one used for show purpose in rodeos.

So long, for now, ever'body. Be seein' you soon at the good Hitchin' Rail.

Buck Benson

OUR NEXT ISSUE

UNCLE MOSE shook his head, the fuzzy, cotton-white hair which covered it seeming to stand more rigidly on end than usual.

"Marse, I tell you I seed him! I seed Cullen Baker just as plain as I sees you right now. He was big and tall—nigh seven foot tall, and wide as that door. He had big black eyes that burned like a swamp moccasin's. His hair was black and all hangin', and his clothes was all wet with grave water. And his face was white like a corpse's. Marse, I seed him over on de wood trail."

"Uncle Mose, you're drunk," young Ross Langtry declared disgustedly.

"No, suh, I ain't drunk," the old colored watchman replied. "I wish I was, then I'd know I'd be all right when I got sober. But

I ain't drunk tonight. Ain't had a swaller in a week. 'Sides, you know, suh, I don't never drink on de job."

Langtry nodded. That was true enough; Uncle Mose was absolutely dependable. "You know darn well Cullen Baker has been dead for years," he pointed out.

"Uh-huh, that's what folks say," Uncle Mose admitted, "but I never heard of anybody seein' de corpsus. I's an old man, Marse, and I rec'lect that robbery when Cullen Baker's brother-in-law told folks he'd done salivated ol' Cullen over on a Bayou 'round Caddo Lake. I was just a little tad then, but I rec'let nobody ever seed de corpsus."

"Even if Cullen Baker wasn't killed, he'd be an old, old man now," Langtry said. "Older even than yourself, Uncle Mose. Why, he'd be one of the oldest men in the country."

"Marse, a man what sells his soul to de debbil don't get old," Uncle Mose retorted.

Langtry threw out his hands in despair. "Get back on the job, Uncle Mose," he said, "I've got work to do."

[*Turn page*]

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After the old Negro had slouched out, the bail of his lantern hooked over his arm, Langtry sat in the office of his sawmill, deep in thought. He wondered what Uncle Mose had actually seen. Not Cullen Baker, that was certain. But he had undoubtedly seen something, something that had upset him considerably.

"Well, anythin' is liable to happen in this section, the way things have been goin' of late," Langtry growled disgustedly. "Nope, even Cullen Baker comin' back to life wouldn't surprise me any more."

Langtry, of course, had never seen Cullen Baker, but he had heard plenty concerning his escapades and depradations, his viciously wanton killings and robberies. He had heard enough to know why Cullen Baker was a name of terror in the pine forests and cotton fields of the section. A name that, even after many years had passed, was still spoken in whispers by the cotton pickers and lumbermen.

And knowing how superstitious were many of his workers, how prone to believe outlandish tales, he knew that if once the story were spread around that Cullen Baker had come back from the grave to again prey on the section, he would have more trouble than he was already plagued with, which was plenty.

Midnight came and went, and Langtry sat on at his desk, poring over a jumble of figures that would not come out right. Hitching up his gun belt, he finally rose and walked to the window to gaze toward the mighty bulk of a tree-crowned mesa towering against the star strewn sky, a prime timber section that to his employees had already become known as haunted.

He shook his head, as if in despair, and returned to his desk and the sheets covered with figures. His dulled perceptions did not note the door behind him swinging slowly open. He flung up his head and turned as a floor board creaked under a stealthily advancing foot.

Numbed for an instant by astonishment, Langtry stared at a towering man with mighty shoulders, abnormally long arms and a livid face dominated by eyes that burned with a mad light. The intruder was almost upon him. Langtry's hand streaked to his holster. A gun barrel smashed against his skull and the world dissolved in a cataract of many-colored flame streaked with ebon blackness.

Which is the situation when *El Halcon* steps into the picture in Bradford Scott's great new novelet, HAUNTED FOREST, coming up in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN.

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In addition to this exciting *El Halcon* novelet, we have a couple of other grand, full-length novelets in our next issue which only a downright churl could dislike. And we'll wager there are few if any of those amongst our readers. Especially "downright" ones.

Anyhow, one of these novelets is about a wild hog hunter, no less, and about a kid who suspected all along that the hog hunter had been instrumental in the horrible death of his father. By John H. Latham, it's called SIX-GUNS SING AT NIGHT.

A powerful tale, it contains a really remarkable admixture of tense drama and surprises, of suspense and human emotions stretched wire thin by fear and suspicion. We're proud to publish SIX-GUNS SING AT NIGHT.

And on the lighter side we have another hilarious Swap and Whopper yarn, THE DOORDEVIL OF HUMPWALLIPS, by Syl MacDowell, in which those two ludicrous loafers are accused of oyster rustling up in the Puget Sound country and run afoul a cantankerous doordevil (a manufacturer of doors to you) among other pestiferous troubles. If you like to laugh, this is the one will turn the trick, folks.

The next issue will also contain all the usual features and departments, of course, as

[*Turn page*]

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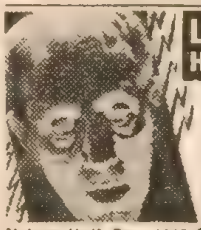

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well as a full collection of fine, swiftly paced, shootin' short stories. If it's the best on the West you're a-hankerin to read, look forward to the next THRILLING WESTERN.

LETTERS FROM READERS

A LOT of nice letters this month. Keep 'em coming along, pardners, for we sure do enjoy hearing your reaction to the stories we've been publishing. They are a great help, too, in informing us of the type stories you best like to read. So let us hear from one and all of you who read the magazine. What say?

And here are a few excerpts from some of the swell epistles we've found in the old mailbag of late:

I read a lot of Western magazines, but for the best, most exciting, genuine stories about the West, I'll take THRILLING WESTERN every time. I'm not just saying this to make you feel good, either, but actually think your magazine overshadows every other I've ever read in the Western field. Keep up the good work.—*Cy Stanislaus, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

That's spreadin' it on pretty thick, Cy, but it shore does ring a sigh of pride from us nevertheless. Thanks muchly.

The other day I happened to come across the October issue of THRILLING WESTERN and found the stories very interesting indeed. I'm stationed way out here miles from anywhere, and I consider picking up a magazine as entertaining as yours quite a nice break. Rhodesia is in many respects much like the West must have been years ago, and our work often takes us for weeks into the bush by horse and foot, as there are native kraals which cannot be reached by any other means. If any other of your readers would care to break the monotony of a lonely policeman's life with a letter, I'd certainly appreciate it.—*G. Tomlin, Miami, Southern Rhodesia, S. Africa.*

Mighty interesting, m'boy, and thanks a lot for writing in. How about some more letters from you hinterland readers scattered around and about the globe?

An interesting dual letter from down Kentucky way:

I'm a gal but like your Western stories very much. I particularly like those by W. C. Tuttle. Sometimes my big brother gets the book first and I have to just sit around and stew until he finishes every bit of it.—*Beatrice Stewart, Leitchfield, Kentucky.*

We read a lot of magazines in our house, but I've always found the stories in THRILLING WESTERN to be my favorite ones. And when I've got time, and my sister doesn't beat me to it, I read the magazine from cover to cover. Just don't ever stop printing those swell yarns.—*Willis H. Stewart, Leitchfield, Kentucky.*

We've been accused of a goodly assortment of things in our time, but causing a family altercation—well, that's a new one. Who's the best scrapper, you or Bea, Will? And may we suggest, from a purely impartial viewpoint, that possibly two copies of the same issue would prevent future abrasions and contusions!

I like THRILLING WESTERN a lot, but don't care too much for the Swap and Whopper stories you always print. Why not make the Walt Slade stories—which are super swell, incidentally—run longer so that they'll occupy the space you waste with the aforementioned funnymen?—*Bert Lyle, Yakima, Wash.*

There's some as like those two funnymen as much as you like the *El Halcon* yarns, Bert. Take the lad below, for example:

Your *El Halcon* tales are grand, but I think the best thing in your magazine are the Swap and Whopper novelets. These two characters are more consistently laughing-out-loud funny than any others I've run across in many, many years of reading. If you don't want to lose a faithful reader, don't ever stop publishing the escapades of that humorous pair of saddlebums.—*Ned Seeley, Lake Charles, La.*

So what can we do? About the only thing is to give you a little of this and a little of that, we figure, to guarantee that all of you will find plenty to entertain you!

And that about does it for this issue, friends. But do keep writing to us, will you? A letter or postcard will do, and just address it to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th.Street, New York 16, N.Y. So long now till next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

Answers to Questions on Page 69

1. A good horse would buy five hundred acres of excellent farm land in the early days of the Republic of Texas.
2. David Crockett.
3. Sam Houston.
4. When he throws his hat into the face of a charging steer.
5. It is a form of blanket that the vaquero carried with him on his saddle or thrown over his shoulder to keep him warm. It served as bedding at night, and was sometimes used to wave cattle into line.

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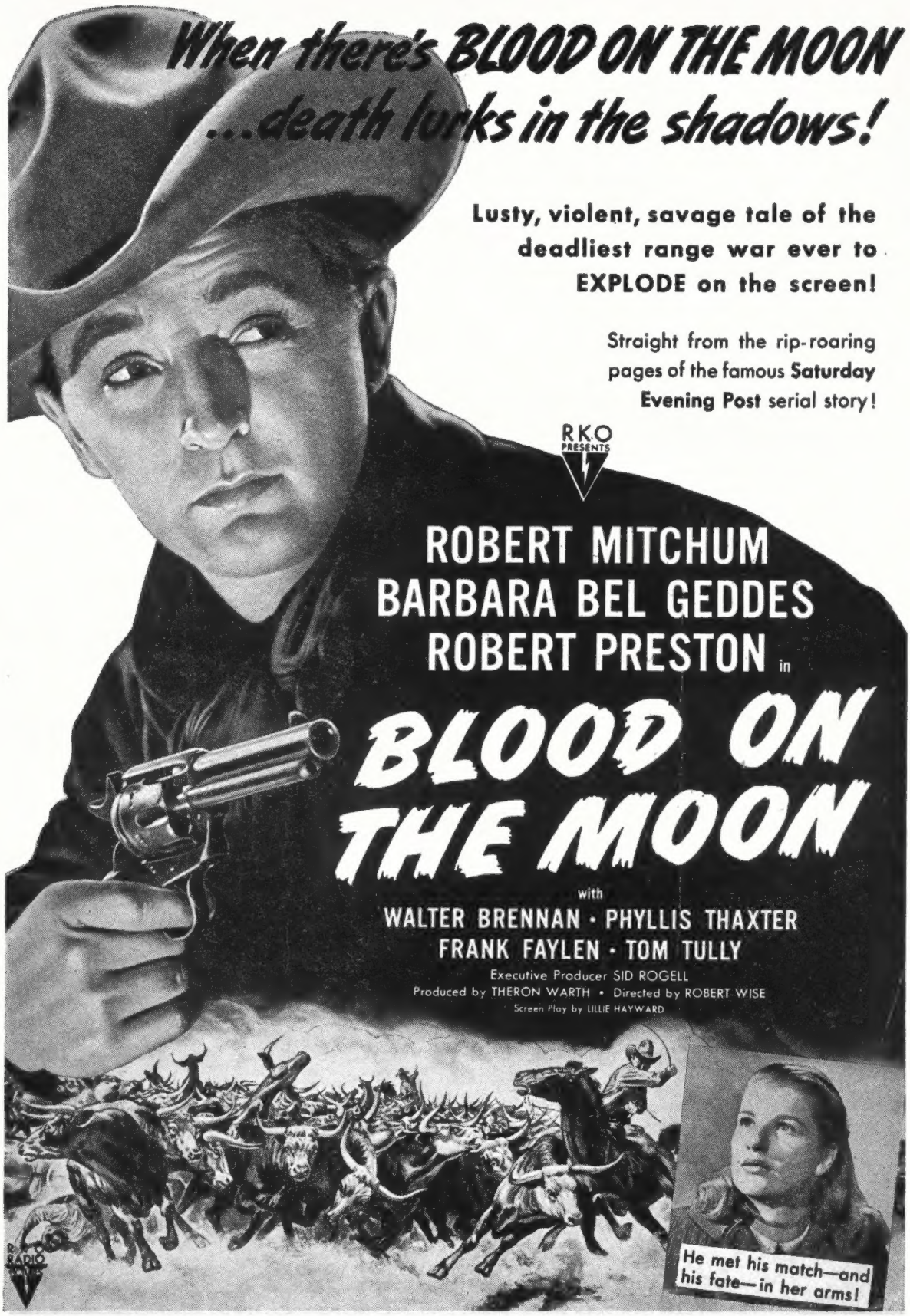
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